COLLEGE BASKETBALL PREVIEW

SI's TOP FOUR: *1. NORTH CAROLINA 2. KANSAS 3. KENTUCKY 4. DUKE*

'15

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HOW THE RESILIENT ROYALS RAN OFF WITH A WORLD SERIES TITLE NO ONE SAW COMING

BY TOM VERDUCCI BY TOM VERDUCCI P. 24



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COLLEGE BASKETBALL PREVIEW

LINEUP

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+

FOUR CAST?

If his surgically repaired left knee holds up, senior forward Alex Poythress is likely to help lead Kentucky to its third straight Final Four.

PHOTOGRAPH BY
James Crisp/AP

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According to SI's exclusive projection system, juggernauts are out–and mid-majors are in
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A scientific look at the candidates
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SI's statistical model provides scoring and efficiency projections for the Top 20 teams

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Erick W. Rasco for Sports Illustrated

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SI NOW WITH HOST MAGGIE GRAY



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KAREEM ABDUL-JABBAR

The six-time NBA MVP, who converted to Islam in 1968, discusses the public's reaction to Muslim athletes today and how he expanded his career as an author after retiring in 1989.

MAGGIE GRAY: *What do you think the response would be today if a high-profile athlete converted to Islam?*

KAREEM ABDUL-JABBAR: I don't think there should be any great uproar about it, unless that person started talking about some of the horrible things that certain people who claim to be Muslim do. As long as that person could be themselves and be an upstanding citizen, I think they should be allowed to have their religious freedom. . . . [Their religion] doesn't have to be something that makes us alienate them, unless they take a hostile or contrary attitude to being a U.S. citizen.

MG: *Do you feel like you were immediately accepted when you converted 47 years ago?*

KA: I don't know if I was accepted *immediately,* but I think as time went on, people saw that I was not being political with my decision, so they just left me alone—as long as I wasn't trying to cause any chaos or make political hay out of it.

> *"I think they should be allowed their religious freedom."*
> **–Kareem Abdul-Jabbar**

MG: *What was it like to walk away from the game after a 20-year pro career?*

KA: There were a number of things I wanted to do that I couldn't do while I was still playing, mainly spending more time with my kids. Still, after a while you have to find something to do to keep from going crazy. For me, writing has also been an outlet. My first history book, *Black Profiles in Courage*, was published in 1996. From then on I just stuck with writing. It's very cathartic for me because there are a lot of things I want to say. □

For more of Abdul-Jabbar's interview, plus the SI Now archive, go to ***SI.com/sinow***

TUNE IN



EPISODE: OCT. 26
Former Giants RB Tiki Barber criticizes Cowboys owner Jerry Jones for standing by DE **Greg Hardy**



EPISODE: OCT. 27
SI senior writer Chris Mannix discusses the role of **Kobe Bryant** with the Lakers this season



EPISODE: OCT. 28
Former boxing champ **Evander Holyfield** talks about which opponents helped to shape his legacy



EPISODE: OCT. 29
Former NFL offensive tackle **Brennan Williams** explains why he left football to take up pro wrestling

JERRY WACHTER FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (ABDUL-JABBAR); JAMES D. SMITH/AP (HARDY); ANDREW D. BERNSTEIN/NBAE/GETTY IMAGES (BRYANT); DAMIEN MEYER/AFP/GETTY IMAGES (HOLYFIELD); THOMAS CAMPBELL/USA TODAY SPORTS (WILLIAMS)


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1 of 3

Leading Off

Yost Toast

Royals catcher Salvador Perez delivered a liquid tribute to manager Ned Yost after a 7–2, 12-inning victory over the Mets in Game 5 of the World Series on Sunday. The win was, typically, a come-from-behind job—Kansas City trailed 2–0 entering the ninth, then rallied for the eighth time in the postseason—and it clinched the second championship in franchise history, the first since 1985. Perez, who hit .364, was named the Series MVP (page 24).

PHOTOGRAPH BY
AL BELLO
GETTY IMAGES


4
AMERICAN PHAROAH
Breeders' Cup

Leading Off

Riding Into History

Victor Espinoza guided American Pharoah to a 6½-length win last Saturday in the final race of the colt's brilliant career, the $5 million Breeders' Cup Classic at Keeneland Race Course (POINT AFTER). The victory took place just 70 miles from Churchill Downs, where Pharoah won the Kentucky Derby in May, the first leg of what would be the first Triple Crown since 1978. The horse, who was sold to an Irish stud farm shortly before the Derby, will begin his stallion career in 2016.

PHOTOGRAPH BY
DYLAN BUELL
GETTY IMAGES





3 of 3

Leading Off

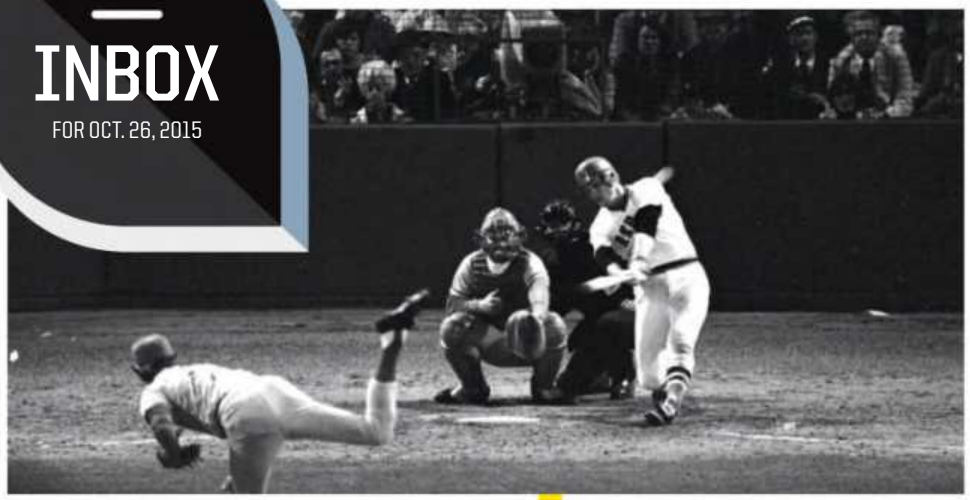
Breakup Artist

Seahawks cornerback Richard Sherman (25) nearly picked off a pass intended for Cowboys tight end Jason Witten (82) on Sunday during Seattle's 13–12 win in Arlington, Texas. Dallas wideout Terrance Williams (83) sported a toothy mouth guard, but it was the Seahawks' D that had the most bite. Sherman & Co. allowed just 91 passing yards—and 220 total—to help even the team's record at 4–4.

PHOTOGRAPH BY
KEVIN JAIRAJ
USA TODAY SPORTS

INBOX

FOR OCT. 26, 2015



Learning about the cadre of contributors—producers, directors, announcers, cameramen and even rats—who helped capture the purity and electricity of Carlton Fisk's walk-off homer, I thought: Now that's teamwork.

Eric Atwood, Marietta, Ga.

Reading Tom Verducci's article about Game 6 of the 1975 World Series, I was struck by how different today's TV coverage is. Instead of trying to reach the largest audience possible, the majority of postseason games are now televised by secondary cable networks, bringing in significantly smaller audiences.

Eric Larson, Maplewood, N.J.

Rather than label Michigan punter **Blake O'Neill** a goat, Michael Rosenberg could have found a herd of goats on the Wolverines' coaching staff. By sending two gunners down the field to cover a punt that no one was back to receive, the coaches left eight men to block 11 rushers. O'Neill never had a chance.

Dan Robinson
Walnut Creek, Calif.



PAGE 19

APOCALYPSE?

If you think about it, Jose Bautista riding a Joey Bats–powered, zero-emissions scooter home is actually the *opposite* of a sign of the end of the world.

Athan Manuel
Washington, D.C.



PAGE 22

When Phil Taylor said droughts make teams memorable, referring to the Cubs' futility and the Red Sox' failure to win between 1918 and 2004, he forgot to mention that the White Sox went without a championship from 1917 to 2005, two years longer than Boston. Apparently some droughts are more memorable than others.

Michael McInerney
Chicago

Taylor's essay on the virtues of endless waits for victory has me revising my life strategy to include fasting, unemployment and celibacy. The anticipatory joy of that eventual meal, paycheck and loving encounter should keep me going for at least the next 50 years.

Alan Miller, Oakland

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Edited by **JIM GORANT** + **TED KEITH**

SCORECARD



Nothing to Lose

In the NFL you can't win 'em all—usually—and this season's crop of unbeatens might want to remember that you're better off if you don't

BY MICHAEL ROSENBERG

THE 2015 Patriots are 7–0, or 8–0 if you count court cases, which has spurred talk about whether they can go undefeated. Sure they can. But should they?

Going undefeated is like ice climbing: It sounds like fun until you actually try it. When teams start a season by reeling off a bunch of victories, they often end it by watching somebody else win the Super Bowl.

The 1972 Dolphins were the last NFL team to go unbeaten. Since then, quite a few teams have looked like they might go undefeated, most notably the '85 Bears and the 2007 Patriots. Chicago lost once, in its 13th game—to Miami, appropriately—and that New England team won 18 straight games before losing to the Giants and David Tyree's helmet catch in Super Bowl XLII.

If everybody wants to rule the world, nobody has quite figured out how to do it. And it's fair to wonder: Are teams better off losing at least once?

This is a particularly relevant question this season because the Patriots are not the only undefeated team. The Broncos, with the NFL's best defense and whatever is left of quarterback Peyton Manning, are also 7–0. So are the Bengals. (At press time so were the Panthers, who hosted Indianapolis on Monday night.)

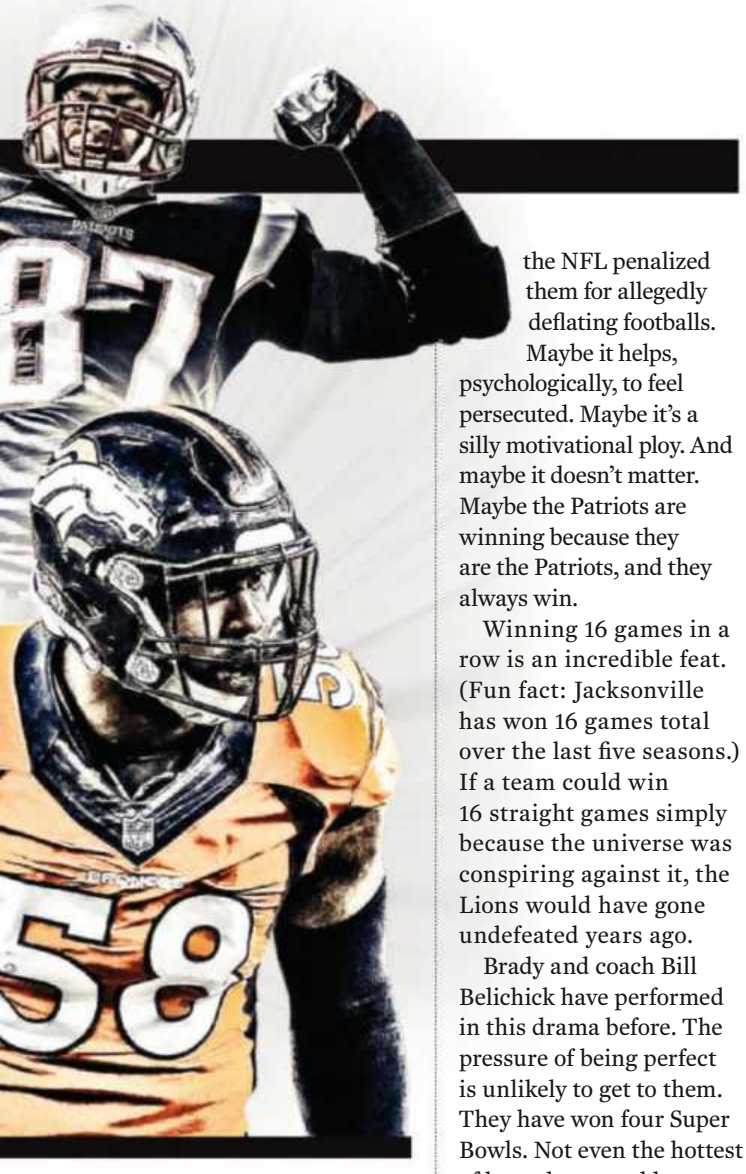
Unbeaten teams, be warned: There is a danger in peaking early. The Lombardi Trophy often goes to the hottest team, not necessarily the best one—four of the past eight Super Bowl champions did not earn a first-round bye, and two did not even win their division.

The pressure of maintaining a perfect record can break even the best team. The last standing undefeated team usually gets knocked down, and it doesn't get back up. The 2009 Colts began the season 14–0, and the '11 Packers started 13–0, but neither won the Super Bowl. The '08 Titans were 10–0 but lost in the divisional round of the playoffs. And of course there were those '07 Patriots.

Ask yourselves, Bengals fans: Do you really want more postseason pressure on Andy Dalton, who has been a fine regular-season quarterback but has crumbled in Januarys past? For that matter do the Broncos really want more pressure on Manning, who is 11–13 in his playoff career?

There is only one team that seems like it can pull off a 19–0, start-to-finish masterpiece, and it resides in New England. Love them or hate them, the Patriots are a steel wall, impervious to outside pressures. They kept winning through Spygate, Deflategate and their star tight end's

KEVIN HOFFMAN/USA TODAY SPORTS (A.J. GREEN); CHRIS HUMPHREYS/USA TODAY SPORTS (VON MILLER); TIMOTHY T. LUDWIG/USA TODAY SPORTS (ROB GRONKOWSKI)



conviction for murder, along with a hundred other smaller storms, like the initial Tom Brady–Drew Bledsoe quarterback debate, or trading and cutting popular players, like DT Richard Seymour. The Patriots' logo ought to be something hitting a fan, with a giant W in the background.

With every Patriots victory, there is more talk about their Revenge Tour, in which the team supposedly seeks retribution against the rest of the league after the NFL penalized them for allegedly deflating footballs. Maybe it helps, psychologically, to feel persecuted. Maybe it's a silly motivational ploy. And maybe it doesn't matter. Maybe the Patriots are winning because they are the Patriots, and they always win.

Winning 16 games in a row is an incredible feat. (Fun fact: Jacksonville has won 16 games total over the last five seasons.) If a team could win 16 straight games simply because the universe was conspiring against it, the Lions would have gone undefeated years ago.

Brady and coach Bill Belichick have performed in this drama before. The pressure of being perfect is unlikely to get to them. They have won four Super Bowls. Not even the hottest of hot-takers would suggest that their legacy hinges on what happens this season. They are already among the best ever. And most of the Patriots take the field knowing that, whatever happens this year, they are already champions.

The Broncos play the Pats and the Bengals later this season, so they could all knock each other off. Cincy or Denver are better off losing at least once. But if they do, they'll probably have to win a playoff game in New England. Good luck with that. □

JONATHAN FERREY/GETTY IMAGES (BREES); JEFF HAYNES FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (REFEREE)

GO FIGURE



7

Touchdown passes for Saints quarterback Drew Brees in a 52–49 win over the Giants at the Superdome on Sunday. Brees tied the NFL mark (with seven others) for most TDs in one game. At one point he completed 18 straight passes.

Plays, out of 141 offensive snaps in the Saints-Giants game, that resulted in a loss of yardage. The two teams averaged 7.3 yards per play.

13

Total touchdown passes for **Brees** and New York QB Eli Manning, setting an NFL record. They broke the mark of 12 set on Nov. 2, 1969, by the Saints' Billy Kilmer and the St. Louis Cardinals' Charley Johnson, who threw six apiece.





49

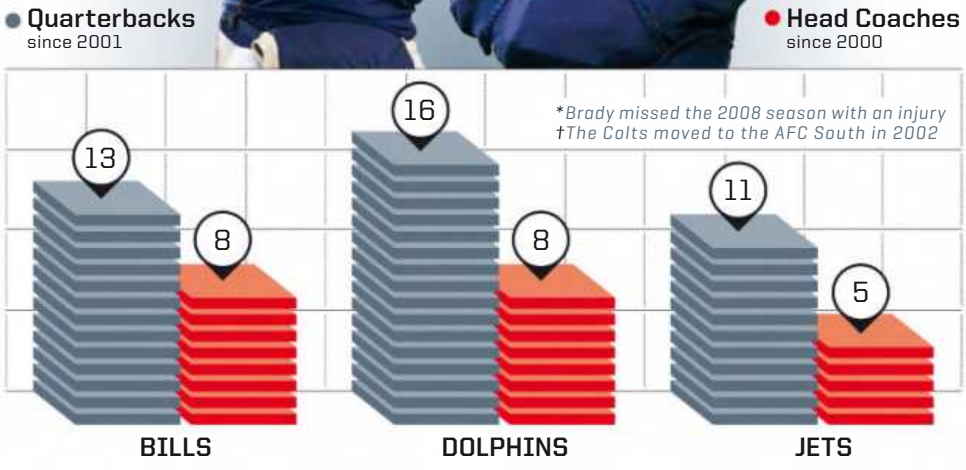
Points scored by the Giants on Sunday, the most in a loss in the team's 91-year history and tied for the most by any losing team in NFL history. New Orleans and New York combined for 101 points, tied for third most in an NFL game.

NEWSMAKERS
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Standing Pats

Outside New England it's easy come, easy go



DOES SUCCESS breed stability or vice versa? Who knows, but since coach Bill Belichick (who took over in 2000) and Tom Brady ('01) teamed up, the Patriots have won 167* games, most in the NFL, and dominated an AFC East† otherwise rife with coach and quarterback turnover.



Dez Bryant's Wild Week

THIS HAD ALREADY been an eventful year for Cowboys All-Pro receiver Dez Bryant, who signed a five-year, $70 million contract in July, then fractured his right foot against the Giants in Week 1. Bryant returned to game action on Sunday in Dallas, but that was not even the most notable event of his past week. To wit:









OCT. 25 — Bryant gets into a shouting match with defensive end Greg Hardy late in a 27-20 road loss to the Giants after Hardy rips the special teams for giving up a 100-yard kickoff return in the team's fourth straight defeat. Bryant later insists it was "just football."

OCT. 26 — An Instagram photo of Bryant holding a baby capuchin monkey, which he named Dallas Bryant, with the caption, "My new best friend" goes viral.

OCT. 28 — For the first time since he suffered his injury on Sept. 13, Bryant is able to practice.

OCT. 29 — Bryant boasts to reporters in the locker room, "You should have seen me in one-on-ones."

NOV. 1 — In a 13-12 loss to the Seahawks in Dallas, Bryant has two catches for 15 yards and appears to taunt Seattle WR Ricardo Lockette after Lockette suffers a concussion and ligament damage in his neck. Bryant denied the taunting postgame, but only after yelling at reporters, "Stay the f--- away! This is our f------ locker room."

NOV. 2 — PETA requests an investigation into Bryant's "possible illegal possession" of the monkey.

AL TIELEMANS FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (BRADY); ELSA/GETTY IMAGES (BELICHICK); JAMES D. SMITH/AP (HARDY); MARK J. TERRILL/AP (BRYANT PRACTICING); BRANDON WADE/AP (BRYANT); INSTAGRAM (MONKEY)

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EXTRA MUSTARD

Ad Age

Commercial Appeal

WHERE'S THE BEEF? Office linebacker? Cindy Crawford? As part of our countdown to Super Bowl 50, SI.com is rolling out a series—Untold Super Bowl Stories—of the overlooked, forgotten or just plain strange history of football's biggest game. The stories debut Nov. 4 with new pieces available every Wednesday at SI.com/SuperBowlStories, including a behind-the-scenes look at the Bud Bowl ads and their unexpected impact. Here is SI's countdown of the most influential commercials in Super Bowl history.



When I Grow Up *1999* Monster.com's sequence of kids saying "I want to claw my way up to middle management" and other precocious commentary on corporate culture provided a counterpoint to the onslaught of commercials featuring juvenile humor.



Bud Bowl I *1989* The stop-animation showdown between long-neck bottles of Bud and Bud Light over five spots peppered throughout the game showed that a brand could dominate the broadcast with a series of related ads that couldn't air on any other occasion.



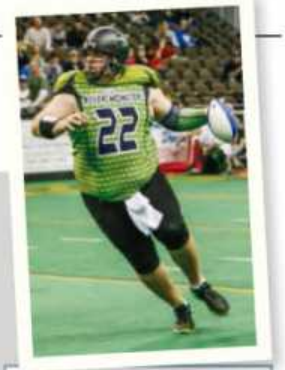
The Force *2011* A kid dressed as Darth Vader uses the force to start his family's VW. It's cute, funny and typical Super Bowl stuff, but the ad touched a cross-generational nerve that made it go viral—it remains the most shared SB spot—and highlighted the value of secondary viewing. It was a happy marriage of execution and timing.



Hey Kid, Catch *1979* When Mean Joe Greene, the rugged, appropriately nicknamed defensive tackle, tossed his jersey to a little scamp who'd gifted the Steelers' star a bottle of Coke, it launched a generation of heart-tugging spots intended to make football fans sniffle—and their husbands, too.



1984 *1984* Apple's revolutionary ad featuring a sledgehammer-wielding woman smashing the projected image of an autocrat proselytizing to a roomful of drones presaged the tech movement, as viewers forced to read Orwell in high school nodded knowingly.



SIGN OF THE APOCALYPSE

Free-agent 320-pound quarterback **Jared Lorenzen** offered his services to the Jets via Twitter, posting "U know you want to."

The Broncos
Their defense dominated again. You know the team is good when **Peyton Manning** is the weak link.



HOT ▲

NOT ▼



Duke
Miami got all the calls on a final-play return TD. For the Dookies' ACC hoops foes, that'll sound familiar.

THEY SAID IT

"I DIDN'T KNOW WHAT THE HELL ELSE TO DO."

Dana Holgorsen

West Virginia coach explaining why he high-fived Trevone Boykin after the TCU quarterback went on an ankle-breaking scramble during the Horned Frogs' 40-10 victory in Fort Worth last Saturday.



YOUTUBE.COM (MONSTER.COM, BUD BOWL, THE FORCE, 1984); COURTESY OF COCA-COLA (HEY KID); AUSTIN MCAFEE/CAL SPORT MEDIA/AP (HOLGORSEN); FRANK VICTORES/USA TODAY SPORTS/GANNETT (LORENZEN); JUSTIN EDMONDS/GETTY IMAGES (MANNING); GRANT HALVERSON/GETTY IMAGES (DAVID CUTCLIFFE)



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UPDATE

Up the Wall

When his family moved to Sugar Land, Texas, in December 2014, 15-year-old Kyle Wicks found himself in a bedroom with bare walls. He decided to decorate the space by covering it with pages from SPORTS ILLUSTRATED. The sophomore at Clements High took 10 months to complete his collage, which uses more than 1,000 photos from 16 years of magazines that he and his dad, Rocco, had collected. "I began covering the walls with my favorite Oklahoma photos from the magazine, and it took off from there," says Kyle, whose mom, Lori, posted his work on Fancred. Only two subjects were off-limits: the Swimsuit Issue and "an old issue that mentioned my dad from when he played football at Army."



Eliza Kallfelz | *Jamestown, R.I.* | *Rowing*

Eliza, a junior at St. George's School in Newport who was competing for Narragansett Boat Club, won the women's youth single at the Head of the Charles Regatta in Boston. Her time of 21:19.349 would have taken the all-ages women's club single title by 33.931. In August, Eliza finished 10th in the single at junior worlds in Rio de Janeiro.



Belesti Akalu | *Shawnee, Kans.* | *Cross-country*

Belesti, a senior at Shawnee Mission North High, won the Class 6A regional meet by 1:06.00 in a school-record 15:19.00 to qualify for states in his first year running cross-country. A week earlier he took the 5K Sunflower League title by 16.10 seconds in 15:37.50. Belesti is undefeated this season against in-state opponents.



Cordelia Chan | *Windsor, Ont.* | *Golf*

Chan, a freshman at Williams, the defending Division III champion, shot a one-over 145 to win the Mount Holyoke Invitational at the Orchards Golf Club in South Hadley, Mass. Her second-round 68 set a school record. Chan finished the season with a stroke average of 77.70 and was named the NESCAC rookie of the year.

FACES IN THE CROWD

Edited by **ALEXANDRA FENWICK**



Chase Edmonds | *Harrisburg, Pa.* | *Football*

Edmonds, a sophomore running back at Fordham, had 31 carries for a Patriot League–record 347 yards and three touchdowns in a 52–49 victory over Lehigh. He also caught two passes for 55 yards to set a league mark with 402 all-purpose yards. Chase leads Division I (FBS and FCS) in rushing TDs (18) and is second in rushing yards (1,444).



Zoe Nunez | *Rockford, Ill.* | *Volleyball*

Zoe, a sophomore setter at Keith Country Day School, had 23 assists, eight digs, four kills and an ace in a 3–0 victory over Harvest Christian Academy (Elgin) for the Northeastern Athletic Conference championship. Zoe, who led Keith to a third straight Class 1A state title last season, has verbally committed to Notre Dame.



Malcolm Oliver | *Damariscotta, Maine* | *Golf*

Oliver, a senior at Division II Bentley in Waltham, Mass., shot a two-under 142 to win a second straight all-divisions New England Intercollegiate Golf Association championship by four strokes at The Captains Golf Course in Brewster, Mass. He is the first repeat titlist at the event since former PGA pro Jim Hallet (1981 to '83).

Nominate Now

To submit a candidate for Faces in the Crowd, go to **SI.com/faces**
For more on outstanding amateur athletes, follow **@SI_Faces** on Twitter.



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JUST MY TYPE

→ *Interview by* **DAN PATRICK**

DAN PATRICK: *How tough is it to not use your accent in movies?*
MARK WAHLBERG: It takes a lot longer to get rid of the Boston accent than it does to figure out other accents. I remember it reminding people of nails on a chalkboard, so I used to work as hard as I could to lose the accent.
DP: *Your accent in* The Departed*? That was real life, like a home game for you.*
MW: That was me imitating my *muuthaa*. It was funny, because while filming, Matt Damon and I would look at each other and say our real Boston accents are going to seem bad because everyone else's are just in and out.
DP: *Where did you watch the Patriots-Dolphins game on Thursday?*
MW: In a movie theater with my wife, Rhea. Thursday night is our date night, so I was watching it on the phone during the movie. She kept trying to snatch the phone, so I finally said, "This movie is not good. Let's go." So we walked out, and I was able to get home for the second half. These guys simply cannot play on Thursdays. That is my one date night.
DP: *[Tom] Brady getting better at this age is surprising.*
MW: He's done a good job of taking care of himself. He continues to work on the fundamentals to get better, and he's not running the ball too much, risking injury. The defense also looks spectacular.
DP: *How tense are you when you watch a game?*
MW: Oh, my God! I can't eat. It's so bad now because my son Michael [nine] is playing football, and they just lost their first game in overtime. Same reaction. I kept thinking, this is only supposed to happen when the Patriots are on. My son was upset. I pace and get uncomfortable. I kicked my daughter out of my office last week when they were playing the Jets because that was a bit of a dogfight.
DP: *What if one of your kids came home and said, "You know, Dad, I like the Jets."*
MW: My youngest son's [seven-year-old Brendan's] first basketball team was called the Knicks. This was out here in L.A. So he is a die-hard New York Knicks fan, a Yankees fan, and he wears an A-ROD shirt, while Michael has a BIG PAPI shirt. But the one [football team] Brendan likes is the Patriots. He doesn't like the Jets or the Giants, which is fine with me.
DP: *Any of the kids wearing Patriots gear for Halloween?*
MW: No, but my daughter Ella [12] is a cheerleader at school, and my wife recently got her a Patriots cheerleading uniform. So my son sees it and says, "That's the only outfit that you've worn in your entire life that I've ever liked." □



MARK WAHLBERG

BOSTON STRONG

The 44-year-old actor spent years trying to mask his thick Boston accent on movie sets, but his passion for the New England Patriots runs deep, much to his wife's chagrin.

GUEST SHOTS

SAY WHAT?



Newly hired Marlins manager **Don Mattingly** told me that the $300 million roster of his former team—the Dodgers—did not earn its keep this season. "You're paying guys for what they've done in the past," Mattingly said. "There are holes and areas where the club could be much better." . . . Former Cowboys quarterback and current Fox analyst



Troy Aikman hasn't given up on 2–5 Dallas: "Had [Tony Romo] not gotten injured, they would have a stranglehold on [this division]. I still think they'll be a factor at the end of the year." . . . USC interim



coach **Clay Helton** stuck up for Steve Sarkisian, despite his predecessor's firing on Oct. 12. "Coach Sarkisian is going to be back one day," Helton said. "He's good in football and good for kids' lives."

MICHAEL J. LEBRECHT II FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (PATRICK); SPOT/AKM-GSI (WAHLBERG); ALLEN BEREZOVSKY/GETTY IMAGES (MATTINGLY); ALLEN BEREZOVSKY/WIREIMAGE/GETTY IMAGES (AIKMAN); RICHARD HARTOG/AP (HELTON)

For the next five weeks THE CASE FOR . . . *will feature a Sportsman of the Year Candidate. Find more nominees at* **SI.com/sportsman**

SPORTSMAN OF THE YEAR

The Case for . . . Carli Lloyd

BY GRANT WAHL



IN THE SOUTHEAST corner of Portugal, in a tiny stadium wedged between the beach, a lighthouse and the river frontier with Spain, Carli Lloyd was wearing a smile and a shiner under her left eye. It was March 2015, months before Lloyd's hat trick against Japan in the Women's World Cup final would electrify a U.S. TV audience of 26.7 million, and yet the performance she had given against Norway that night in the town of Vila Real de Santo António was just as revealing, perhaps more so, considering how few people—just a couple hundred—were there to see it.

The U.S. had lost twice in recent games, 3–2 to Brazil and 2–0 to France, and had fallen behind Norway 1–0 at the half when Lloyd decided to take over the match. With a scowl as fearsome as the black eye she'd picked up in her previous game, Lloyd lashed home the equalizer from outside the box with her left (weaker) foot. Then a few minutes later she calmly struck the penalty that would become the game-winner. "I'm sick of losing," she said afterward. "I'm sick of all the naysayers saying, *You're [only] second in the world—the U.S. is done*. I'm a winner, and I want to go out there and win."

In 2003, at age 21, Lloyd considered quitting soccer after she was cut from the U.S. Under-21 team. But she listened when her new mentor and personal coach, James Galanis, told her about Michael Jordan and Muhammad Ali and Bruce Lee, who all trained when nobody was watching, by which he meant going above and beyond what others were doing while away from the national team. It resonated with her, and so she did the same. Since then Lloyd and Galanis have trained during the off-season twice a day, seven days a week, including on holidays—knowing full well that the competition is not.

If a player trains when nobody is watching, she might be able to do superhuman things when the entire world is watching. Like scoring a hat trick in the first 16 minutes of a World Cup final, an eventual 5–2 victory over Japan. Or topping off that hat trick with an astonishing 50-yard strike from midfield, the greatest goal in U.S. soccer history, a shot so audacious that it's surprising to learn that Lloyd had actually practiced it for years with Galanis on an empty field in New Jersey, far from any crowds. If the greats are measured by how they perform on the most important occasions, then Lloyd now deserves her place among them. That's what happens when you score six goals in the final four games of World Cup 2015, raising your level as the stakes get higher. That's what happens when you have scored the winning goals in two Olympic finals, in 2008 and '12. And that's what happens when you pull off one of the greatest individual performances ever in a World Cup final, men's or women's.

> In 2003, at the age of 21, Lloyd considered **quitting soccer after she was cut** from the U.S. Under-21 team.

For those reasons Lloyd is a deserving choice as SPORTS ILLUSTRATED's 2015 Sportswoman of the Year. She answered the call when nobody was watching. She answered the call when everyone was watching. In doing so, she and her World Cup champion teammates taught us a lesson about the paradigm of excellence, all while including an entire nation on the journey. Her Cup—their Cup—was indeed *our* Cup. When President Obama honored the team at the White House in October, he said, "Playing like a girl means you're a badass." Carli Lloyd fits the part. □

BOB FRID/EPA

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FRISKY BUSINESS

The Royals' scouting reports identified two holes in the Mets' defense that informed Hosmer's decision to dash for home in the ninth inning of the clincher.

Photograph by **Tim Clayton** For Sports Illustrated

ROWNING MOMENT



WORLD SERIES

FOR THREE DECADES THE ROYALS WANDERED IN THE BASEBALL DESERT, LOSING MORE GAMES THAN ANY OTHER CLUB. THE DROUGHT IS OVER, THE RESULT OF A NEW MODEL FOR HOW THE GAME IS PLAYED, THOUGH ONE THAT IS NOT EASILY REPLICATED

BY TOM VERDUCCI

A MAJOR LEAGUE hitter today strikes out 48.8% more often than a hitter did 30 years ago. The financial incentive for power, be it on the mound or at the plate, has pushed baseball toward a game with the inertia of arm-wrestling, a test of stubbornness and might in which, for long stretches, not much happens.

Pitchers give their ulnar collateral ligaments to keep the baseball out of play while big-swinging hitters oblige them on the off chance they might actually make contact well enough to hit a home run, which pays like the Vegas slots: eventually, if not often. Strikeouts per game have risen 10 consecutive years, the last eight of which have set a new record. Meanwhile, the rate of stolen bases has dropped to its lowest level in 28 years.

If baseball is reaching a crossroads—an increasingly static game in an increasingly dynamic entertainment world—Eric Hosmer of the Royals found himself frozen in its intersection Sunday night. Hosmer stood about 15 feet off third base on a flaccid one-hopper to Mets third baseman David Wright, who fielded the baseball about 25 feet from Hosmer. The 111th World Series, with the fifth game being played in the 11 o'clock hour on 11/1, had reached a binary point in the top of the ninth inning, with the Mets clinging to a 2–1 lead and facing elimination.

Run, and Hosmer risked being thrown out to end the contest, sending the Series to a sixth game. Hold, and Hosmer would put the game in the hands of the next batter, Alex Gordon, against Mets closer Jeurys Familia. If you watched the Royals play at all this postseason, as if their uniforms were made of flannel and their will of steel, you knew the choice was an obvious one.

"Being up three games to one," Hosmer said, "you feel like you're playing with house money. The first instinct with us is always to be aggressive."

What happened next helped not only to hasten the end of the World Series and bring Kansas City a world championship 30 years after its only previous one, but also to position the Royals as a historically important team. What's beyond doubt is that Kansas City is the most prolific rally team in postseason history. Game 5, which eventually ended after 12 innings in a 7–2 score that masked the night's tension, marked the seventh time this postseason that Kansas City came from multiple runs down to win. The 1996 Yankees had been the only team to pull off even five such rescue operations.

Less certain, though perhaps more important, is how the Royals might change the game with how they played this season. They reinvented baseball as a contact sport. They doggedly sprayed singles and doubles around the field (they hit one ball out of the park in the Series, and happily went their last 171 plate appearances without a home run) while unnerving the fumble-fingered Mets by stealing and taking extra bases at any opportunity—even when down to their last out in Game 5.

DARK NIGHT

Harvey was brilliant for eight innings in Game 5, but signs of fatigue were exposed in the ninth when Hosmer doubled off his old travel team housemate.

Watching the Royals win the World Series with a deep ensemble cast of contact hitters raised an obvious question: Why doesn't everybody play like this?

"It's not that easy," says hitting coach Dale Sveum. "First of all, this is the result of [GM] Dayton Moore putting in all the hard work to build a team for a big ballpark that is athletic, plays defense, has speed and puts the ball in play. It's part of every player he drafts and acquires. And second of all, it takes the players all buying in. You know how hard that is in today's game? For guys not to care about their own RBIs or



ERICK W. RASCO FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED

home runs or runs scored and just emphasize 'keep the line moving'? It's a special group. It's a special culture. It's not like any old team can go to spring training next year and just go, 'Let's do that.' "

DREW BUTERA, a backup catcher acquired in a trade from the Angels in May, had been a Kansas City Royal for two days when, on May 9, he found himself in a standard pregame scouting and game-planning session with pitcher Jeremy Guthrie and catching coach Pedro Grifol. They reviewed hitters on that day's opponent, the Tigers. Grifol brought up the name Mark Ripperger. Ripperger? Butera knew Ripperger didn't play for the Tigers. Ripperger was an umpire, assigned to work the plate that day.

*"WOULD YOU DO THAT AGAINST YOU?" ASKED KUNTZ. "**HELL NO,**" SAID HOSMER.*

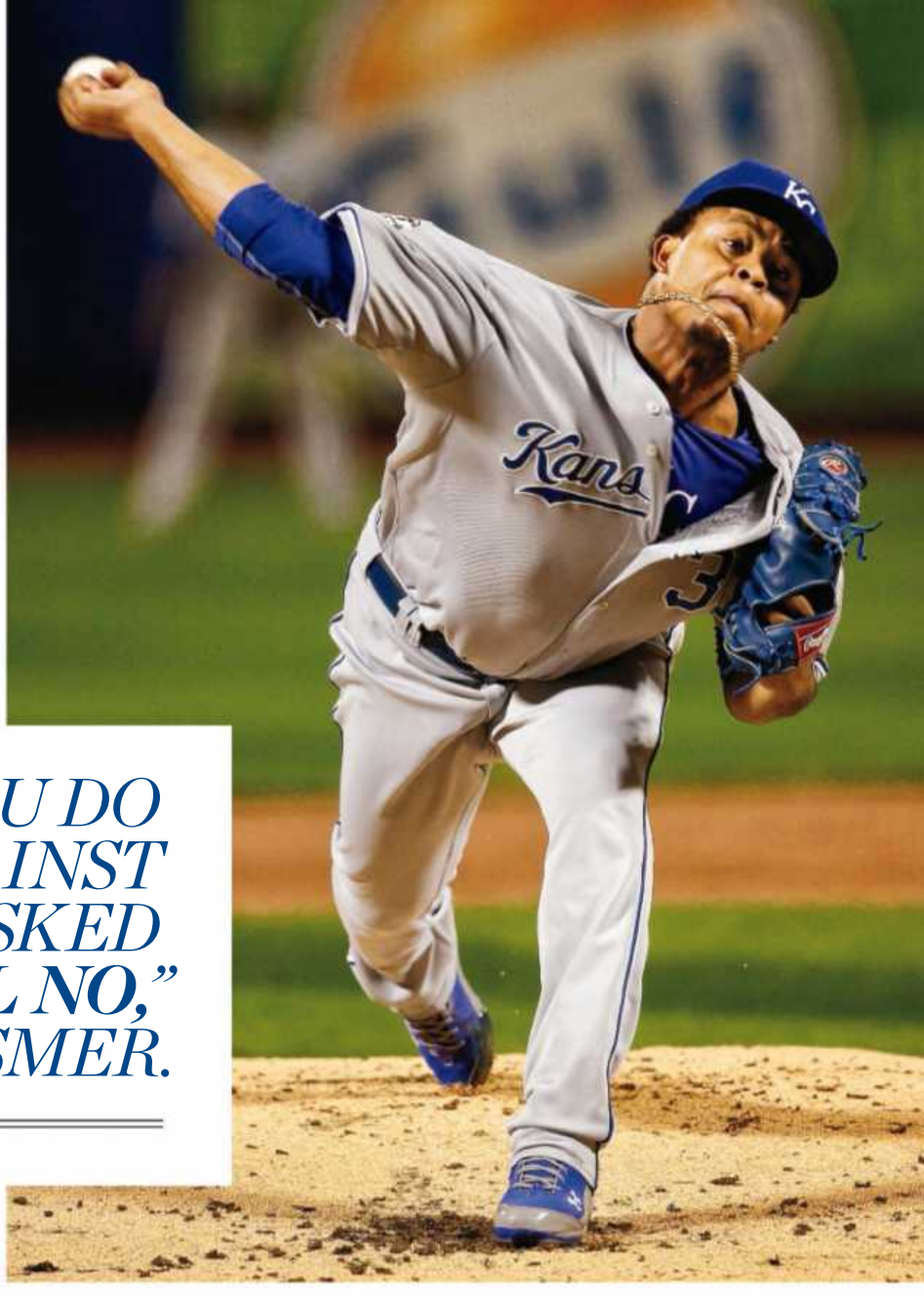
Butera, who had played with the Twins, Dodgers and Angels, suppressed his surprise as Grifol broke down Ripperger's tendencies as surely as he did the Detroit hitters.

"I had never heard anything like it," Butera says. "I had never thought about it. But as I listened, I thought, This makes perfect sense. What kind of zone does he have? What are his tendencies? A scouting report on the umpire? I realized right away they do things differently here."

THE METS represented both the National League and the modern game in the World Series. They hit home runs to cover for a lack of speed, and their young power pitchers kept the ball out of play. New York boasted three of the toughest starting pitchers to manage contact against in all of baseball: Jacob deGrom (sixth), Matt Harvey (10th), and Noah Syndergaard (13th), as well as a budding Clayton Kershaw in rookie Steven Matz.

But Kansas City sent a message of resistance from the very first pitch: a heater by Harvey that most decidedly was contacted by Royals shortstop Alcides Escobar, the feng shui leadoff hitter for skipper Ned (Yoda) Yost. (Just go with the flow and harmony of his placement atop the batting order, because otherwise Escobar's .293 on-base percentage, the worst by a Royal leadoff hitter since Vince Coleman in 1994, makes no analytical sense.) Escobar hit a deep drive that fell for an eventual inside-the-park homer when daydreaming centerfielder Yoenis Cespedes didn't see it at first and demurring leftfielder Michael Conforto, thinking he heard Cespedes call for it, didn't see it at last.

Harvey and his partner in power, Game 2 starter DeGrom, threw 83 fastballs while getting just two swings and misses on



BACK TO FORM
Volquez (above) was as reliable Sunday as he had been all season, despite pitching just five days after his father's death.

JULIE JACOBSON/AP



them as Kansas City took the first two games at home, 5–4 and 7–1.

Asked why he threw a career-low 38% fastballs in Game 1, Harvey said, "A combination of feeling [lousy] and knowing how well they hit the fastball."

Admitted DeGrom, who for the first time in his career could not extract a single swing and miss from his fastball, "I don't know why I really went away from it. It might have gotten in my head this was a good fastball-hitting team."

HOSMER STARED at Wright as the Mets' third baseman cradled the ball and prepared his feet and arm to throw across the diamond to first baseman Lucas Duda for the second out of the ninth inning. Hosmer quickly ran through the calculus in his head.

He remembered two items from the exhaustive preseries scouting report on the Mets. Wright, who missed most of the year with spinal stenosis, compensated for his back condition by adopting an odd throwing technique: he would drop his hand to about waist height and fling the ball with a looping, left to right arc. This maneuver, while easier on his back than the usual overhand motion, took more time.

Hosmer also knew from the reports that Duda does not throw especially well. First base coach Rusty Kuntz, a baseball counterintelligence officer of the highest order, said from that position Hosmer would run on only "a handful" of first basemen. Duda—"bless his heart," Kuntz said—was one of the handful.

"I asked Eric, 'Would you do that against you?' " Kuntz said. "He goes, 'Hell no.' "

THE CONVENTIONAL modern game did win out one night, anyway. Behind Syndergaard, who threw an angry sentinel of a first pitch past Escobar, the Mets won Game 3, 9–3. But the Royals restored their new world order in the eighth inning of Game 4, when they won 5–3 with a three-run, low-impact eighth-inning rally: walk, walk, error by Daniel Murphy, single, single.

Cain provided the key at bat of the game when he drew one of the two ill-fated walks issued by Mets reliever Tyler Clippard. It was only the fourth time all year Cain managed a walk after falling behind 0 and 2.

"What we do really begins in spring training," Sveum said. "I emphasize winning the full counts. You do that and you most likely will win the game. I give them a lot of information on what a pitcher likes to throw on full counts.

"The other thing we emphasize is keeping the head still. If you look at all the great hitters who made contact, their head is still. Wade Boggs, Gary Sheffield . . . Sheffield had all that movement in his swing but not in his head. He was a slugger who made contact."

MURPHY'S FLAW

The hero of the NLCS with his bat saw his glove fail him in the Series' final two games.



HOSMER REACHED third base by way of Cincinnati. In the summer of 2007, while in high school in Miami, Hosmer, then 17, was recruited to play on a travel team. It would fly him and other players to various cities for tournaments, then fly them back. On occasion some players used the Cincinnati-area home of an assistant coach as a base in between tournaments. The coach would give the players chores around the house to earn their keep.

One day three of the boys staying at the house were doing yard work in front of the house. One was cutting the grass, one was edging the lawn and a third was trimming the bushes. A neighbor dropped by and asked if he could take a picture.

"Why?" the coach wondered.

"Because you've got about $400 million of yard work being done."

The roommates were Hosmer, Harvey and future Red Sox infield prospect Deven Marrero. The team went 54–6 and won the Connie Mack World Series. Hosmer was the series MVP. Harvey won the clincher.

Eight years later, in the ninth inning of Game 5 with the Mets leading 2–0, Harvey and Hosmer stared at one another from 60 feet, six inches away. The confrontation was made possible only

AL TIELEMANS FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (TOP); SEAN M. HAFFEY/GETTY IMAGES (BOTTOM)

MARKET MEN

A SNEAK PEAK AT THE REITER 50: THE TOP FREE AGENTS THIS WINTER

BY BEN REITER

Free agency is allegedly a dying institution, due largely to the ultra-long-term contract extensions given to many of baseball's best young players, but it will look more lively this winter with the best class of free agents in the game's history. Here's a sneak peek at the eighth installment of the Reiter 50, SI.com's annual ranking of the off-season's top 50 free agents. The full list can be found at SI.com/mlb.

1 DAVID PRICE

LHP Age: 30
Current Team: Blue Jays
Best Fit: Yankees

Price is a power southpaw whose ERA (2.45) and strikeout rate (9.2 K/9 IP) were better than they were when he won the AL Cy Young Award in 2012. The Yankees are committed to thrift these days, but they could make an exception for Price.

2 ZACK GREINKE

RHP AGE: 32
Current Team: Dodgers
Best Fit: Dodgers

Expensive pitchers in their 30s are usually risky propositions. Then again, Greinke just put up the best single-season ERA (1.66) in 20 years. L.A. can't afford to lose Greinke—and it *can* afford his sky-high price tag.

3 JASON HEYWARD

OF Age: 26
Current Team: Cardinals
Best Fit: Phillies

Conventional stats don't suggest that Heyward is this year's top offensive talent, but they don't take into account his elite defensive and baserunning skills. And at age 26, he has plenty of room to blossom as a power hitter.

4 YOENIS CESPEDES

OF Age: 30
Current Team: Mets
Best Fit: Angels

The Mets can't match the nine figures Cespedes will command, and perhaps they shouldn't try: His .805 OPS over his four full seasons doesn't scream superstar. But the Angels could view Cespedes as the final piece of a lineup that is built to win now.



TIM CLAYTON FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (CESPEDES); JEFF GROSS FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (GREINKE); MATT BROWN/ANGELS BASEBALL LP/GETTY IMAGES (PRICE)

5 JUSTIN UPTON

OF AGE: 28
Current Team: Padres
Best Fit: Mariners

Upton is a slugger who strikes out a lot. But clubs will value not only his productive current form, but what he still has time to become at his relatively young age. Even though Upton blocked a trade to Seattle three years ago, the team is much closer to contention than it was then.

6 JORDAN ZIMMERMANN

RHP Age: 29
Current Team: Nationals
Best Fit: Cubs

He was continually overshadowed in his own rotation, but Zimmermann has been a model of consistency for five full years now, in which he's averaged 31 starts and a 3.14 ERA. The Cubs' NLCS loss to the Mets showed that they need another top-line starter behind Jon Lester and Jake Arrieta.

7 CHRIS DAVIS

1B Age: 29
Current Team: Orioles
Best Fit: Red Sox

This year Davis hit 47 homers with a .923 OPS—and that should earn him a $100 million–plus contract. He'd look very good in Boston, which will need to replace the 39-year-old David Ortiz sooner rather than later.

8 ALEX GORDON

OF Age: 31
Current Team: Royals
Best Fit: Astros

He was a key to their title, but Gordon doesn't fit the financial profile of players the Royals sign. His premier fielding in left would make the Astros' excellent defense even stronger; his championship-level experience would fortify their clubhouse; and his on-base skills would give their lineup needed balance.

9 MATT WIETERS

C Age: 29
Current Team: Orioles
Best Fit: Braves

Wieters is by far the best catcher available this winter—and the rebuilding Braves need someone with a power bat who can also help develop the many high-caliber minor league arms they've assembled.

10 JOHNNY CUETO

RHP Age: 29
Current Team: Royals
Best Fit: Rangers

Before his deadline trade from the Reds to the Royals, Cueto was on Price's level, but then he went 4–7 with a 4.76 ERA in 81 1/3 innings with K.C. Still, he could be the wild card in a Texas rotation that already has Yu Darvish and Cole Hamels.



by the sentimentality of Mets manager Terry Collins, 66, who had flunked out of jobs with the Astros and Angels because of an almost complete lack of sentiment. Collins had decided to replace Harvey with Familia after the eighth inning, but when pitching coach Dan Warthen delivered the news to Harvey in the dugout, the pitcher stomped over to Collins and successfully lobbied to stay in the game.

"When we saw Harvey come out for the ninth, we were happy," Sveum insists. "He had been so much better in this game than in Game 1. His fastball was electric. But we saw in the eighth inning his pitches were getting up. His slider was flattening out. It had lost its tilt. We had some pitches to hit and just missed them. When he came back out, that's when we could see a way to a win."

Cain, leading off the ninth, worked the count full and—what else?—won the at bat by taking a slider for ball four. (The Royals posted the best full-count average in the league during the regular season.) Now it was Hosmer's turn.

"I knew he didn't want to get beat by something other than his fastball," Hosmer said of Harvey.

After Cain stole second, Harvey threw a 94-mph fastball. Hosmer ripped it for an RBI double off his former housemate and teammate.

GRAND ENTRANCE Colon made his postseason debut in style, with a Series-winning single, his first RBI in 41 days.

IN BETWEEN the championship seasons of 1985 and 2015, the Kansas City Royals lost more games than any franchise in baseball. Finding bottom was like plumbing the Mariana Trench. It could have been the time in 1993 when a piqued Hal McRae, one of 13 managers in those 29 seasons, heaved a telephone off his office desk; or the three straight seasons with at least 100 losses (2004–06); or the year the Royals finished last in the league in attendance ('08).

In 2006, Kansas City hired Moore to be its general manager. Moore took a look at the dimensions of the club's home park (large) and of his market size (third smallest in baseball) and decided he needed athletic players who could run, play defense and put the ball in play.

"Power," he said, "is the most expensive commodity in baseball."

It took five years, but by 2011 Moore's Triple A team in Omaha was stocked with Hosmer, Cain, outfielder Jarrod Dyson, catcher Salvador Perez, third baseman Mike Moustakas, outfielder Paulo Orlando and pitchers Danny Duffy, Greg Holland and Kelvin Herrera—essentially one third of a world championship team four years later.

As strikeouts in the game grew, the Royals kept improving on the premise of making contact. They refused the modern notions of driving up pitch counts and taking pitches to get walks. They hacked at the first good pitch they saw. Kansas City saw the fewest pitches per plate appearance and took the fewest walks in the AL. They drew fewer walks than any full-season World Series champion except the 1933 New York Giants.

"They take their shots at the big fly early," Harvey says. "But as they get deeper into the count and deeper into the game, they shorten up and put the ball in play. The amazing thing about them is that they are aggressive in the strike zone, but it's hard to get them to chase outside of the zone."

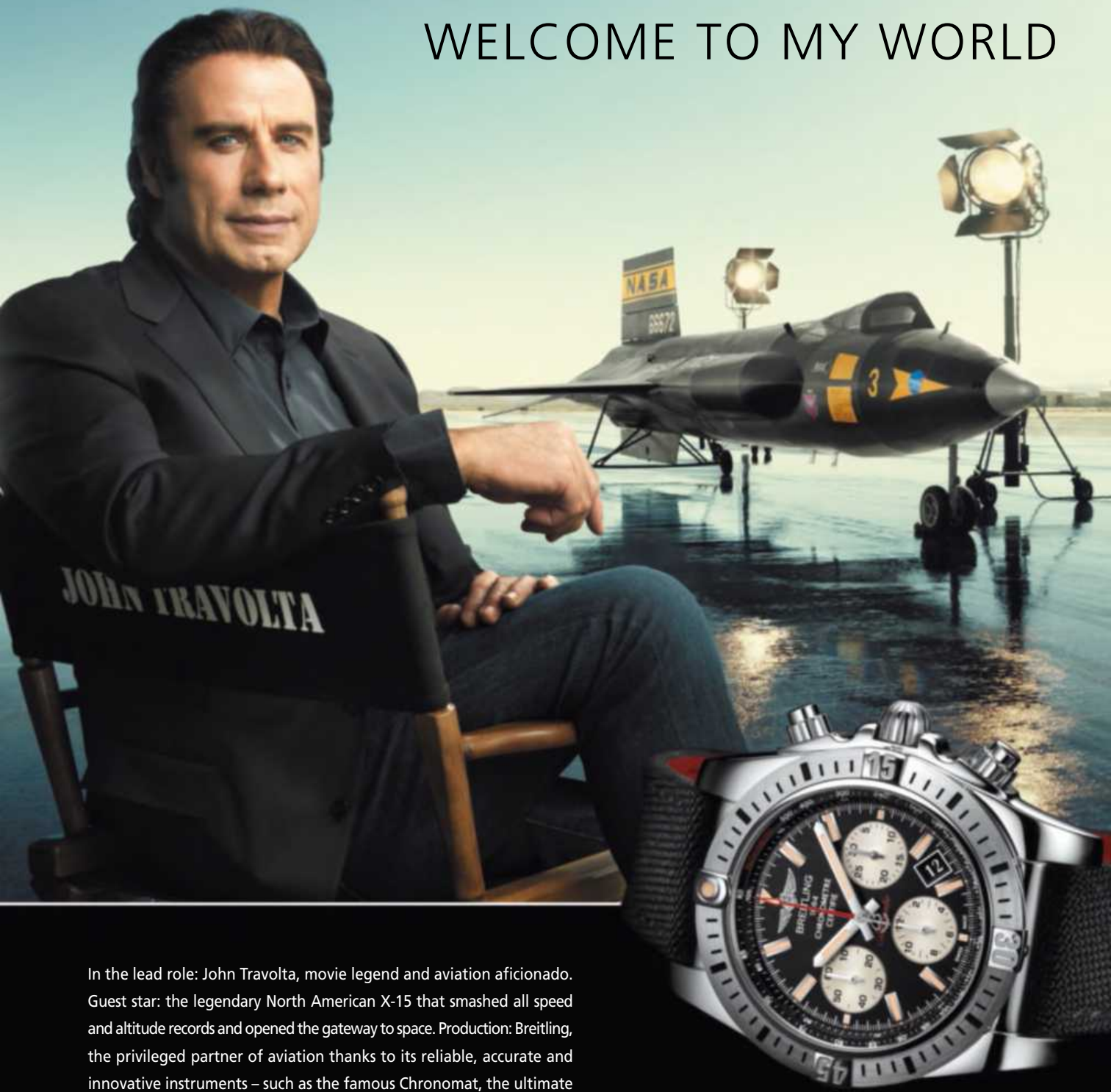
ONLY AFTER Hosmer smacked his double did Collins remove Harvey.

"Sometimes you let your heart dictate your mind," Collins said. "Again, we had said going in if Matt gave us seven [innings], Jeurys was going to pitch two. I've got one of the best closers in the game. I got him in the game, but it was a little late. And that's inexcusable, for me."

Moustakas moved Hosmer to third with a grounder. Batting next, Perez hit the weak squibber to Wright. Hosmer thought about

CHUCK SOLOMON FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED

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how a compromised Wright threw the baseball, especially noticing how Wright was shuffling away from him. He thought about the suspect defense of Duda. He thought about the three-games-to-one lead.

"As soon as I saw his head turn to first," Hosmer said of Wright, "I took a chance. Actually, when I first took a first step, I didn't think it was a great situation for me."

As Duda took the throw from Wright and readied himself to throw home, it was obvious that Hosmer was going to be out and the Mets would win 2–1.

"I would have been shocked if Hoz didn't try that," Kuntz says. "If he gets thrown out, guess what? We play Game 6. Duda, bless his heart, was wide left."

Duda threw the ball away, past the lunge of Travis d'Arnaud. Hosmer dove home headfirst to tie the game. All postseason opponents had cracked under the Royals' relentlessness: an error by Houston shortstop Carlos Correa when the Royals trailed by three runs, six outs from ALDS elimination; the imaginary voices that prompted both Toronto second baseman Ryan Goins in the ALCS and later Conforto to back away from pop fly outs; the 14th-inning error by Wright in Game 1. Now it was Duda chucking a hand grenade of a throw to the backstop.

SUCH A stickler for details is Kuntz that he spent 40 minutes on the flight from Kansas City to New York studying video of just two pitches, hoping to find a "tell" in the evidence. When Perez opened the 12th inning with a bloop single off Addison Reed, Jarrod Dyson pinch-ran and immediately consulted with the master code cracker, Kuntz.

"Just relax. He's going to go 1.1, 1.2," Kuntz said, referring to a quick time between when a pitcher starts his delivery and when he gets rid of the ball. "He's going to go quick the first couple of pitches. Then he's going to give a little hip shake, and that's when you go."

Reed did use a quick slide step on each of the first two pitches, but the haste caused him to elevate both pitches out of the strike zone. The count was 2 and 0. On the next, Reed gave "a little hip shake," designed to generate more power than the slide step. Dyson took off. He stole second base easily.

Gordon sent him to third with another straight-from-the-textbook grounder to the right side. Then backup infielder Christian Colon, who had not batted the entire postseason and had not driven home a run in 41 days, whacked a tiebreaking single—on a two-strike pitch, naturally.

The rest of the inning unfolded the way so many other innings did this postseason for Kansas City: a torrent of runs, this time five in all, with Royals hitters littering the yard with hits.

"Just put the ball in play," Kuntz said, "and see what happens."

The most prolific rally team in postseason history outscored opponents 51–11 after the sixth inning. While Royals hitters played pepper with pitches, the ferocious, deep bullpen went 8–0, capped by six shutout innings in Game 5. Closer Wade Davis took care of the final three outs. It was Butera, on a called strike three, who caught the last baseball.

"I've still got it," he said after the game, "and I've got a place at home for it. If they ask for it, I'll give it to them, but for now I'm keeping it."

Baseball changed so much since Kansas City last won the World Series that the Royals used more pitchers just in Game 1 this year (seven) than they did in the entire 1985 World Series (six). The question now is where it goes from here. Are the Royals the way forward with their aggressive brand of offensive baseball, or did Moore spend years crafting a recipe that can't be copied?

Butera considered the question, and thought about that scouting report on an umpire and how the first time he took batting practice as a Royal, he noticed it was different than in other places—how batters were spraying the ball around the field, especially up the middle, rather than turning the exercise into a useless long-drive competition.

"I'm telling you, it's like nothing I've seen anywhere else," he said. "And the reason why you might not see it like this anywhere else is you have to get all the guys to buy in to play like this. They have to buy into the system."

That would seem to be the best explanation about how the World Series was won and where we go from here. The system didn't win it. The Royals did. □



WORTH THE WAIT
The Royals and their fans, many of whom made the trip to Citi Field, celebrated the team's second championship late into the night.



AL TIELEMANS FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (TOP); CHUCK SOLOMON FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (BOTTOM)

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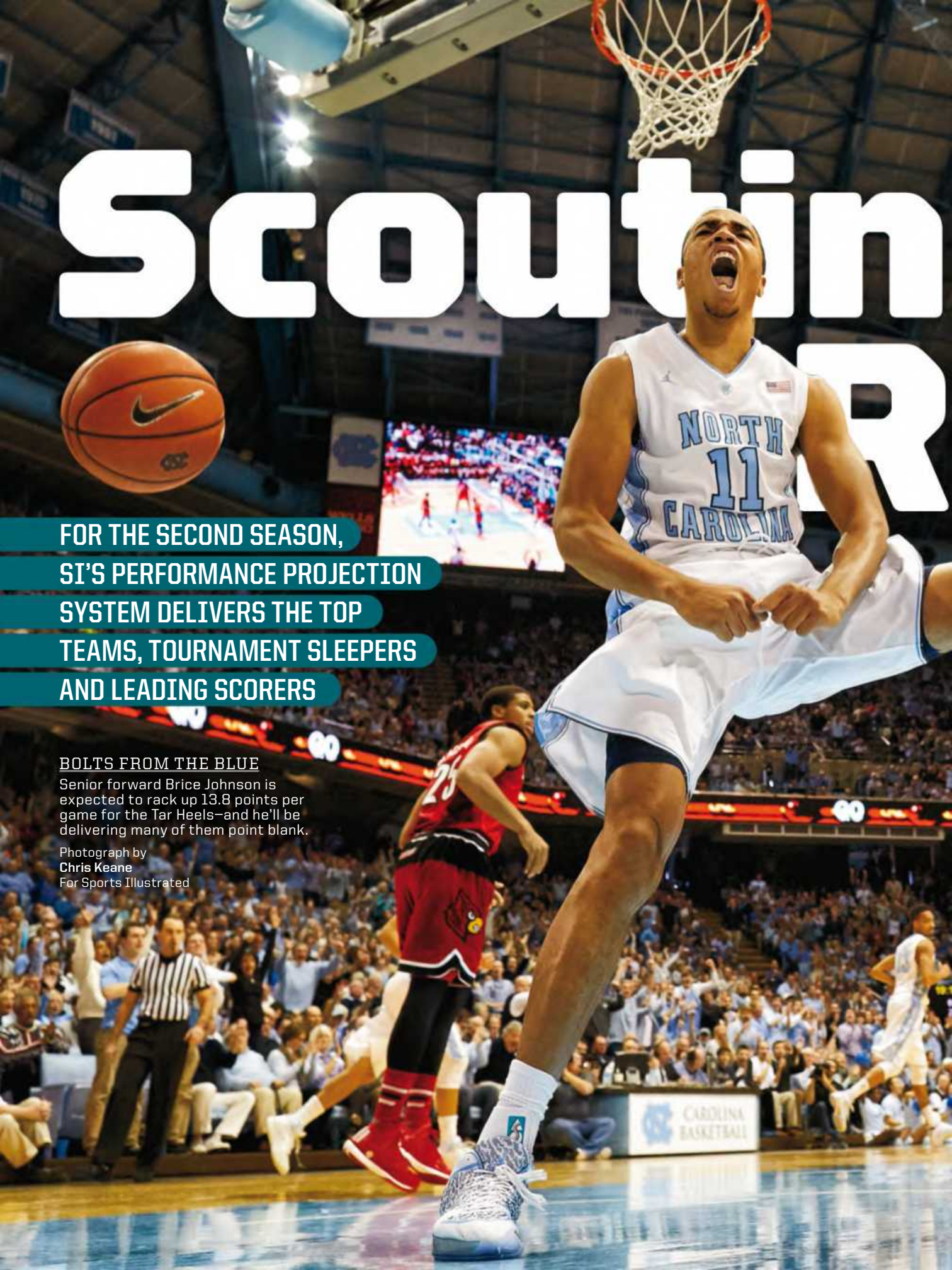
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BOLTS FROM THE BLUE

Senior forward Brice Johnson is expected to rack up 13.8 points per game for the Tar Heels—and he'll be delivering many of them point blank.

Photograph by
Chris Keane
For Sports Illustrated


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INSIDE THE RANKINGS

EXPLAINING SI'S METHODOLOGY—AND WHAT THE DATA SHOWS

BY LUKE WINN

MEN'S Top 20

1 North Carolina
2 Kansas
3 Kentucky
4 Duke
5 Maryland
6 Virginia
7 Wichita State
8 Villanova
9 Gonzaga
10 Iowa State
11 Arizona
12 Oklahoma
13 California
14 Indiana
15 Michigan State
16 Utah
17 SMU
18 Georgetown
19 Connecticut
20 Texas

COLLEGE BASKETBALL values drama over predictability. This is the trade-off that defines the sport, that captivates the nation for three weeks in spring, when the champion is decided by a 68-team single-elimination bracket, a format that does little to ensure that the best team wins.

SPORTS ILLUSTRATED's College Basketball Projection System is, in a way, the anti–NCAA tournament. Our statistical model simulates a given season 10,000 times in order to find the most frequent No. 1—this year, that would be North Carolina—and determine where the other 350 Division I teams fall in line. This marks the second year that SI's preseason rankings have been decided by the projection system, a collaboration among economist Dan Hanner, SI producer and writer Chris Johnson and me. The results from year one were promising: The system forecast—in exact order—the eventual top four teams in adjusted efficiency (Kentucky, Arizona, Wisconsin, Duke). It also predicted that title-game opponents Wisconsin and Duke would have the most efficient offenses, and it ranked all eight of the NCAA tournament No. 1 and No. 2 seeds among its top 10.

For offense, the system projects every player's efficiency and shot volume by incorporating his past performance, recruiting rankings, development curves for similar Division I players, the quality of his teammates and his coach's ability to develop and maximize talent. Those stats are weighted based on the team's rotation—including human intel on who's expected to play—then used to produce each team's offensive efficiency projection. (The 10,000 simulations account for significant variance in individual performances as well as injury scenarios.) Team *defensive* efficiency projections are based on a blend of individual stats (rebound, steal and block percentages), roster turnover (if churn is low, then 2014–15 performances in areas such as two-point field goal percentage are given a lot of weight; if high, then a coach's historical defensive résumé matters more), experience (veterans have fewer lapses) and height (taller frontcourts make for stingier D).

This is what the projections tell us about 2015–16.





SIMON BRUTY FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED

1 THIS IS NO YEAR FOR JUGGERNAUTS

The Tar Heels are No. 1, but the system hardly indicates they're a threat to run the table: This year's UNC team would have ranked *eighth* in SI's 2014–15 preseason projections. Along with Kansas and Kentucky, North Carolina makes up a cluster of good-but-not-great teams at the top. But while the high end of the rankings looks softer than it did last season, the *back* end looks stronger: SI's No. 25 team, Miami, would have ranked 20th in '14–15, and the No. 50 team, Tulsa, would have been 44th. The 2016 NCAA tournament should yield weaker No. 1 seeds than last season's but stronger six to 11 seeds.

2 DEPTH OF TALENT IS WHAT SEPARATES NORTH CAROLINA AND KANSAS

Often overlooked in Duke's title run last spring was the absence of a single meaningful second of playing time by someone who wasn't formerly a top 100 recruit (according to the Recruiting Services Consensus Index). North Carolina is set to follow suit this season: All 10 players in its rotation were top 100 recruits, providing injury insulation at every position. Kansas, likewise, could give minutes to 10 former top 100 prospects and feasibly endure an injury at any spot while still contending for the Big 12 title. Wisconsin, on the other hand, is projected noticeably lower (No. 34) by SI than in traditional polls, and that's based on a dearth of quality depth. The Badgers have two All-America candidates at the top of their rotation—forward Nigel Hayes and point guard Bronson Koenig—but no strong alternatives behind either. They could end up with as many as five freshmen in their rotation, only one of whom was a top 100 recruit. Wisconsin has a history of finding and developing underrated talent, but it's historically rare for a non-top-100 recruit to make a significant impact as a freshman on a major-conference team.

3 THE BIG-OFFENSE, ADEQUATE-DEFENSE MODEL COULD KEEP WORKING

Duke entered last season's NCAA tournament No. 3 in kenpom.com's adjusted offensive efficiency ranking but 57th in the adjusted defensive efficiency rankings—and we all know how that worked out. The Tar Heels ride a similar model to No. 1 this preseason; we project that they'll have the nation's No. 2 offense and just its 45th-best defense. Indiana, SI's No. 14 team, offers an even better test case, though, for big offense and marginal defense. Behind the talented backcourt scoring duo of Yogi Ferrell and James Blackmon Jr., the Hoosiers are projected to have the No. 1 offense but just the 113th D. If they can find a way to crack the defensive top 50—if, say, five-star freshman center Thomas Bryant emerges as a strong rim protector, or if they can ratchet up pressure after ranking 330th nationally in turnover percentage last year—then they're a dark-horse title contender.

4 MARYLAND WILL HAVE TO DEFY SOME HISTORY TO WIN IT ALL

SI's projections fancy the Terrapins, putting them fifth overall, but that's lower than nearly every poll out there. What could hold Maryland back? Coaching plays a significant role in our calculations, and while Mark Turgeon's teams have made the NCAA tournament six times over 15 seasons at Wichita State, Texas A&M and Maryland, his offense has never ranked in the top 25 in adjusted efficiency, and only three times has he led a top 25 defense. A fair follow-up question: Has Turgeon ever had this much talent at his disposal? Probably not. But he's had future NBA players to work with in Donald Sloan, DeAndre Jordan, Khris Middleton and Alex Len—not to

mention one season already in College Park with two pros-to-be, forward Jake Layman and point guard Melo Trimble—and he has yet to turn that individual flair into a highly efficient unit. Conversely, there are coaches who keep producing elite teams regardless of personnel. A prime example: Bill Self, who's had top 10 defenses for eight of the past 10 seasons at Kansas. Thus, we peg the Jayhawks to have a top 10 D once again, even after losing two key rotation players to the NBA.

5 THE TERPS WOULD BREAK THE MOLD FOR TITLE-TEAM CONSTRUCTION

Among the past 10 national champs there have been four basic models of team construction. (*Veteran* denotes a sophomore or above.)

- One-and-done-freshmen-led, veteran-augmented: Duke 2015, Kentucky '12
- Veteran-led, freshmen-augmented: UConn '11, North Carolina '09
- Veteran-led, transfer-augmented: UConn '14, Louisville '13
- Purely veteran-led: Duke '10, Kansas '08, Florida '07, Florida '06

This year's Terps? They're none of the above. They look more like a sampler platter from every talent pool. They have vets in Layman, Trimble, swingman Jared Nickens and guard Dion Wiley. They have a potential one-and-done center in Diamond Stone. They have two high-impact D-I transfers in guard Rasheed Sulaimon (from Duke) and forward Robert Carter Jr. (Georgia Tech), both of whom we project to start. They have a top 100 juco transfer in point guard Jaylen Brantley, who will back up Trimble. They even have two internationals who could contribute frontcourt relief minutes in Ivan Bender (Bosnia) and Michal Čekovský (Slovakia). Aside from finding a D-II or D-III transfer, Maryland seems to have worked every angle.

6 GET READY FOR THE MID-MAJORS TO MAKE SOME NOISE

Rare is the season in which we can claim that the nation's most efficient backcourt and most efficient frontcourt both come from mid-majors. No. 7 Wichita State has an unmatched 1–2 combo in senior point guard Fred VanVleet (projected to have an All-America level 121.1 offensive rating while using 25% of the Shockers' possessions when he's on the floor) and senior shooting guard Ron Baker (120.1 on 22%), who also defend their positions better than any other backcourt duo. No. 9 Gonzaga is reconfiguring its lineup so that 6' 10" senior Kyle Wiltjer, whom SI projects as the nation's best high-usage scorer (127.9 offensive rating on 26%), can play small forward and share the frontcourt with two high-efficiency imports: Domantas Sabonis (from Lithuania) and Przemek Karnowski (Poland). All three are polished scorers with NBA potential.

Valparaiso (at No. 40) has a nation-high 98.5% of its minutes back from last season, when the Crusaders made the NCAA tournament as a No. 13 seed. That makes them the strongest Horizon League team since Butler in 2011. The gap between the blue bloods atop SI's rankings and Wichita State and Gonzaga is not large at all. And Valparaiso, by being mentioned in the same sentence as Brad Stevens's last great Butler team, has at least a shot at a title, right? We're not quite ready to declare this the season that a mid-major wins it all. What we *are* saying is that there's a reasonable statistical possibility. □

SI.COM

For the complete ranking of all 351 D-I teams, conference breakdowns and expert analysis, go to **SI.com/CBBpreview**



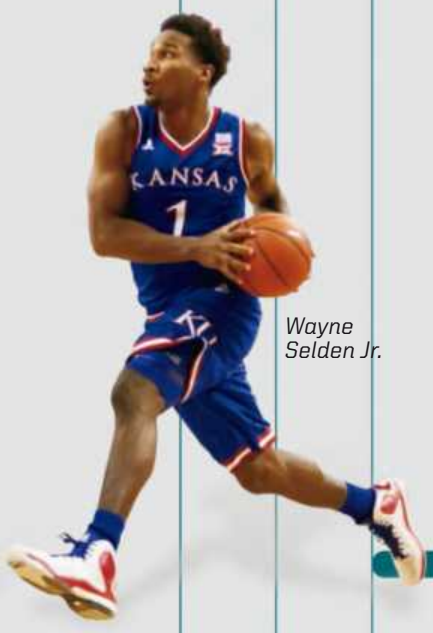
CHUCK BURTON/AP (MEEKS); GREG NELSON FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (SELDEN, ULIS); TIM CLAYTON FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (JEFFERSON)

ELITE EIGHT | FINAL FOUR | TITLE GAME | TITLE GAME | FINAL FOUR | ELITE EIGHT | SWEET 16 | ROUND OF 32 | ROUND OF 64

NCAA CHAMPS



Kennedy Meeks

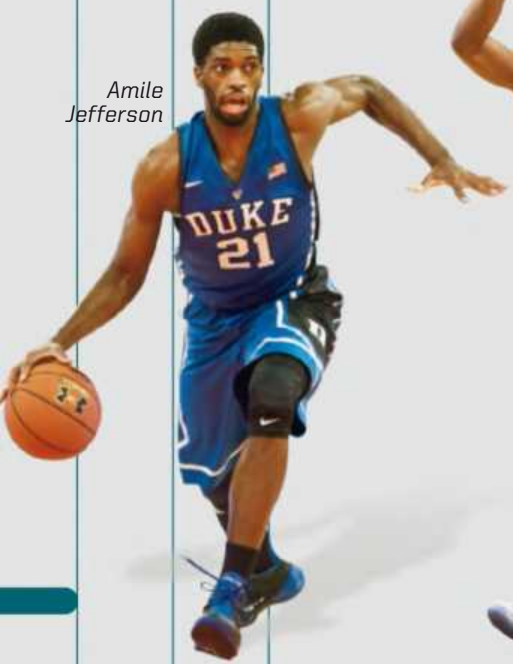


Wayne Selden Jr.

MIDWEST

KANSAS	1
MOUNT ST. MARY'S/TEXAS SOUTHERN	16
CINCINNATI	8
WISCONSIN	9
XAVIER	5
BOISE STATE/ DAVIDSON	12
INDIANA	4
IONA	13
LOUISVILLE	6
RHODE ISLAND	11
ARIZONA	3
SOUTH DAKOTA STATE	14
TEXAS A&M	7
N.C. STATE	10
WICHITA STATE	2
WOFFORD	15

OVEMBER MADNESS



Amile Jefferson



Tyler Ulis

SOUTH

KENTUCKY	1
N.J. INST. OF TECH	16
WEST VIRGINIA	8
BUTLER	9
UCONN	5
MARQUETTE/VCU	12
MICHIGAN STATE	4
UAB	13
NOTRE DAME	6
FLORIDA	11
IOWA STATE	3
HIGH POINT	14
OHIO STATE	7
FLORIDA STATE	10
VIRGINIA	2
PRINCETON	15

ELITE EIGHT | FINAL FOUR | TITLE GAME | TITLE GAME | FINAL FOUR | ELITE EIGHT | SWEET 16 | ROUND OF 32 | ROUND OF 64

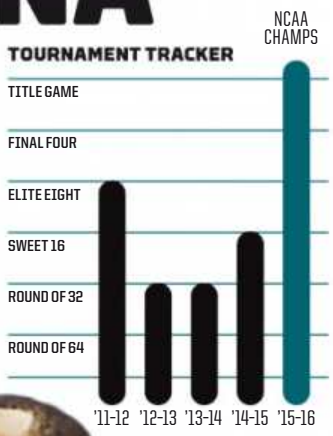
1 | NORTH CAROLINA

PROJECTED TEAM STATS OFFENSIVE EFFICIENCY 120.3 (2nd) DEFENSIVE EFFICIENCY 95.4 (45th) ACC RECORD 13–5 (T-1st)



X-FACTOR

If **Brice Johnson** can become a consistent post scorer and stay on the court (13 fouls in three NCAA tournament games last year), he would keep defenses from cheating on the Tar Heels' perimeter shooters.



CAPABLE, DEEP AND FULLY HEALED

Point guard **Marcus Paige** led the Tar Heels in points (14.1 per game), assists (4.5) and steals (1.7) last year, despite suffering from a foot injury that severely limited his practice time from late December on. "My whole right foot was pretty much jacked up," he says.

Surgery last April removed the bone spurs that were complicating his plantar fasciitis, and now the 6' 2" Paige can jump into the season with both feet—a major reason why North Carolina is SI's choice to win the 2016 NCAA championship. With nine of the top 10 players back from last year's Sweet 16 team, including dependable pass-first sophomore point guard **Joel Berry** and sixth man junior guard **Nate Britt**, the Tar Heels have a rare blend of talent, experience and depth in today's one-and-done world.

Paige will still run the point in late-game situations, but he'll spend more time off the ball, making the most of his marksmanship. (He is eight three-pointers shy of Shammond Williams's school record.) With 6' 10" senior **Brice Johnson** and 6' 10" junior **Kennedy Meeks** spearheading the nation's best frontcourt, the Tar Heels should dominate the boards, which will spark **Roy Williams**'s high-octane secondary break.

For the first time in years North Carolina begins the season with more answers than questions.

—Seth Davis



CHRIS KEANE FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (PAIGE); PEYTON WILLIAMS/UNC/GETTY IMAGES (JOHNSON)

STAT SHEET With 2015-16 projections for the top six scorers

Coach **Roy Williams** (13th season)

			PPG	RPG	APG	OFF. RATING	USAGE
PG	Marcus Paige* 6' 2"	Sr.	14.3	3.6	4.6	120.2	20.2%
PF	Brice Johnson* 6' 10"	Sr.	13.8	8.6	1.1	116.7	22.9%
SF	Justin Jackson* 6' 8"	Soph.	13.4	5.2	2.3	118.3	19.8%
F-C	Kennedy Meeks* 6' 10"	Jr.	12.3	8.2	1.2	115.9	22.7%
PF	Isaiah Hicks 6' 9"	Jr.	10.0	4.8	0.6	110.9	20.7%
PG	Nate Britt 6' 1"	Jr.	6.7	1.7	2.0	110.3	18.6%

*Starter

2 | KANSAS

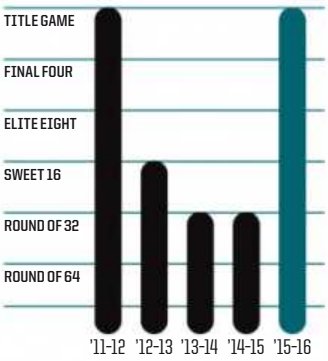
PROJECTED TEAM STATS OFFENSIVE EFFICIENCY 116.4 (8th) DEFENSIVE EFFICIENCY 92.5 (6th) BIG 12 RECORD 13–5 (1st)



X-FACTOR

Svi Mykhailiuk, a deadeye 6' 8" sophomore from Ukraine, added 10 pounds (to reach 205) in hopes of muscling his way into the lineup. "[With Mykhailiuk] you can run bad offense and come away with three points," coach Bill Self says.

TOURNAMENT TRACKER



THE SHORT ANSWER

When **Frank Mason III** and **Devonte' Graham** shared the backcourt last year, they were usually wearing practice jerseys. In games, coach **Bill Self** chose to play either the 5' 11" Mason or the 6' 2" Graham alongside big wings like 6' 7" Kelly Oubre Jr. (now a Wizards rookie) and 6' 5" **Wayne Selden Jr.**, then a sophomore. But the effect of small ball in the team's workouts was clear. "More good things were happening than bad," Mason says.

The Jayhawks expect that to continue this year. To accelerate tempo and to get better passers and playmakers on the floor, Self plans to start Mason and Graham and hope they do for Kansas what similarly statured backcourts did for recent NCAA champs Duke and Louisville. "We're getting back to playing the way we have when we've had our better teams," Self says.

Graham, a sophomore, has a good feel for momentum and game flow as a point guard, and he can shoot (42.5% from three last year). Mason is a natural scorer who despite his size likes to attack the rim, though he also ranked in the 74th percentile nationally in points-per-spot-up (1.032) last year, per Synergy Sports data. They will feed off each other while raising their teammates' productivity. "When it's both of us [playing]," says Graham, "it takes the pressure off our wing guys and helps everybody make better decisions on the court." *—Brian Hamilton*

STAT SHEET With 2015-16 projections for the top six scorers

Coach **Bill Self** (13th season)

			PPG	RPG	APG	OFF. RATING	USAGE
PF	**Perry Ellis*** 6' 8"	Sr.	16.3	8.4	1.5	116.4	24.3%
PG	**Frank Mason III*** 5' 11"	Jr.	12.7	2.9	3.8	115.3	21.2%
PF	**Cheick Diallo** 6' 9"	Fr.	10.8	7.5	0.8	115.0	21.0%
G-F	**Wayne Selden Jr.*** 6' 5"	Jr.	9.0	2.6	2.2	110.6	19.8%
SF	**Brannen Greene** 6' 7"	Jr.	6.7	2.9	1.0	120.4	16.4%
PG	**Devonte' Graham*** 6' 2"	Soph.	6.4	2.0	2.3	113.4	17.6%

*Starter



DAVID E. KLUTHO FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (MASON); ED ZURGA/GETTY IMAGES (MYKHAILIUK)

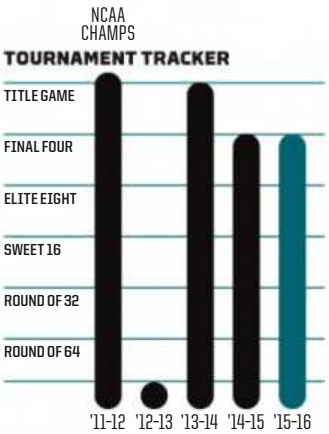
3 | KENTUCKY

PROJECTED TEAM STATS OFFENSIVE EFFICIENCY 117.4 (5th) DEFENSIVE EFFICIENCY 93.3 (12th) SEC RECORD 14–4 (1st)



X-FACTOR

Kentucky has produced 10 first-round frontcourt players in the last six NBA drafts. **Skal Labissiere** could go No. 1 in June, but first the skilled big man from Haiti must polish his offensive game and become the next great UK shot blocker.



PROPHECY FULFILLED

When 5' 9" **Tyler Ulis** committed to Kentucky in September 2013, he knew he'd never be the most talked about prospect on the roster, but coach **John Calipari** convinced him that he would be critical to the team's success. And after seven players left Lexington early for the NBA last June, Calipari's words have proved prophetic. Ulis, the smallest Wildcat by three inches, is now the team's unquestioned leader. "He is our best player," Calipari told reporters at media day, "and it ain't close."

Over the summer Ulis, a sophomore, focused first on recovering from the shin splints that hampered him for much of last year. Even though he'll be asked to score more (5.6 points in 2014–15), he won't shed his identity as a pass-first point guard who smothers opponents on D. He's also out to show that he can be just as aggressive defensively in a smaller, three-guard lineup that won't have Kentucky's usual forest of 7-foot shot swatters for protection.

Practice against his fellow Wildcats has helped Ulis, well, grow. Last season he guarded Aaron and Andrew Harrison, who are both 6' 6". This year he's battling five-star freshmen **Jamal Murray** and **Isaiah Briscoe**, both of whom are likely to beat Ulis to the NBA by a couple of dozen picks—if not a couple of years. Ulis doesn't care. "[Calipari] believed in me, even though I'm two feet tall," he says. "And I'm out to prove him right." —*David Gardner*



GREG NELSON FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (ULIS); ELLIOTT HESS/UK ATHLETICS (LABISSIERE)

STAT SHEET With 2015-16 projections for the top six scorers

Coach **John Calipari** (7th season)

			PPG	RPG	APG	OFF. RATING	USAGE
SG	Jamal Murray*	6' 4" Fr.	14.4	5.6	2.2	115.7	23.2%
PF	Skal Labissiere*	6' 11" Fr.	13.8	8.8	1.0	115.7	23.2%
PG	Tyler Ulis*	5' 9" Soph.	10.1	2.5	4.7	122.0	19.0%
SF	Alex Poythress*	6' 8" Sr.	9.3	5.6	0.5	110.0	19.1%
PG	Isaiah Briscoe	6' 3" Fr.	9.3	3.7	3.4	110.4	20.9%
SG	Charles Matthews*	6' 6" Fr.	7.6	3.3	1.5	105.6	19.5%

*Starter

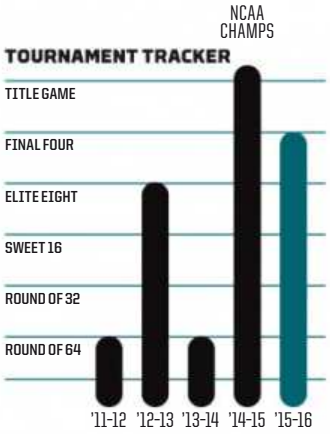
4 | DUKE

PROJECTED TEAM STATS OFFENSIVE EFFICIENCY 118.8 (3rd) DEFENSIVE EFFICIENCY 94.9 (37th) ACC RECORD 13–5 (T-1st)



X-FACTOR

Freshman forward **Brandon Ingram**, 6' 9" with a 7' 4" wingspan, has the frame, explosiveness, ballhandling skills and shooting range to play four positions.



A NEW CLASS RISES

Matt Jones is a known quantity, if not a dazzling one. The lone returning starter from last year's national championship team is a dogged, conscientious defender who quickly identifies opponents' weaknesses and then exposes them. At 6' 5" and 200 pounds, Jones can do this against point guards or power forwards, permitting coach **Mike Krzyzewski** to deploy different defensive looks as needed. "If I take the best player out on each team," Jones says, "we'll have a good chance of winning."

Such dependability is valued in Durham, where roster overhaul is now an annual rite. But the Blue Devils did retain sophomore guard **Grayson Allen**, a fearless dribble-driver, who's an ideal fit for an offense predicated on applying pressure from the perimeter. Freshman point guard **Derryck Thornton**'s quick hands and feet can push the tempo, while center **Chase Jeter**, 6' 10" and an athletic 240 pounds, can pile up putback dunks and weakside blocks. And **Brandon Ingram** may be the most gifted newcomer of them all. The versatile 6' 9" forward, a top five recruit, can create mismatches all over the floor.

Relying on freshmen worked for Duke in the not-so-distant past. But as senior **Amile Jefferson** cautions, "It's not about what we did last year."

—B.H.



JOHN W. MCDONOUGH FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (JONES); LANCE KING/GETTY IMAGES (INGRAM)

STAT SHEET With 2015-16 projections for the top six scorers

Coach Mike Krzyzewski (36th season)

			PPG	RPG	APG	OFF. RATING	USAGE
SG	Grayson Allen*	6' 5" Soph.	16.4	4.0	1.7	119.7	22.8%
G-F	Brandon Ingram*	6' 9" Fr.	15.6	6.9	1.6	114.7	24.0%
PG	Derryck Thornton	6' 2" Fr.	11.9	3.9	4.1	109.4	21.6%
PF	Amile Jefferson*	6' 9" Sr.	10.2	8.6	1.3	126.2	17.8%
SG	Matt Jones*	6' 5" Jr.	9.5	3.4	1.3	116.5	16.8%
F-C	Chase Jeter	6' 10" Fr.	7.9	4.8	0.6	109.4	21.6%

*Starter

5 | MARYLAND

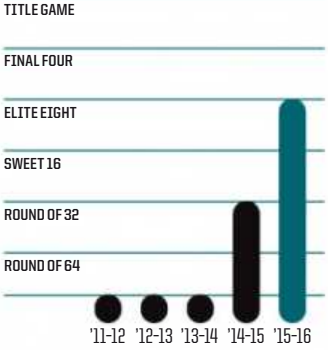
PROJECTED TEAM STATS OFFENSIVE EFFICIENCY 115.6 (10th) DEFENSIVE EFFICIENCY 92.5 (8th) BIG TEN RECORD 14–4 (1st)



X-FACTOR

Rasheed Sulaimon was averaging 7.5 points at Duke before being dismissed from the program last January for failing to meet team standards. Will the 6' 4" senior guard be productive or divisive in College Park?

TOURNAMENT TRACKER



PULLING OUT ALL THE STOPS

As a freshman, **Melo Trimble** led the Terrapins in minutes (33.5 per game) and scoring (16.2 points). He was also one of their worst points-per-possession defenders. Essentially, the 6' 3" playmaker was nonstop—on both ends of the court. "Coach **[Mark] Turgeon** told me he really couldn't take me out because I scored a lot," Trimble says, "but my defense was terrible."

Maryland should suffer fewer defensive deficiencies this winter. A team that led the Big Ten in field goal percentage D (39.5% shooting allowed) is bigger with the additions of 6' 9" junior forward **Robert Carter Jr.**, a transfer from Georgia Tech, and 6' 11" freshman **Diamond Stone**. And with that extra depth behind him, the Terps' most valuable player can push his defensive aggression. "[Trimble] will be allowed to foul," Turgeon said. "Last year he'd get a foul, and it would be, 'I don't want to even see two.' "

Although Trimble scored in the 90th percentile nationally in transition (1.345 points per possession), spot-up (1.259) and isolation (1.027) scenarios, per Synergy Sports data, he craved a more complete game. So he watched film of Clippers guard Chris Paul to learn how to stay active and spearhead a defense. "It's [about] not being lazy," Trimble says. "I want to take pride in it. I want to be able to check anyone." —B.H.



SIMON BRUTY FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (TRIMBLE); MARYLAND ATHLETICS (SULAIMON)

STAT SHEET With 2015-16 projections for the top six scorers

Coach **Mark Turgeon** (5th season)

			PPG	RPG	APG	OFF. RATING	USAGE
PG	**Melo Trimble*** 6' 3"	Soph.	16.3	3.9	3.2	117.9	24.1%
SF	**Jake Layman*** 6' 9"	Sr.	12.8	5.5	1.4	114.5	21.9%
F-C	**Diamond Stone*** 6' 11"	Fr.	11.4	7.5	0.9	118.0	21.1%
PF	**Robert Carter Jr.*** 6' 9"	Jr.	10.1	7.9	0.8	110.4	21.2%
SG	**Rasheed Sulaimon*** 6' 4"	Sr.	8.6	3.1	2.2	115.0	18.8%
SF	**Jared Nickens** 6' 7"	Soph.	7.7	2.5	0.7	118.8	15.4%

*Starter

YOU CAN TAP THIS PAGE

ALL YOU WANT,

BUT YOU WON'T SEE THE

AMAZING PLAY

THAT'S HAPPENING RIGHT NOW.

YOUR SPORTS ALWAYS ON TAP.

IT'S LIKE A SPORTS BAR IN YOUR POCKET

120 SPORTS



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6 | VIRGINIA

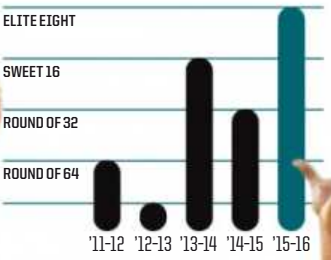
PROJECTED TEAM STATS OFFENSIVE EFFICIENCY 111.9 (33rd) DEFENSIVE EFFICIENCY 90.3 (2nd) ACC RECORD 13–5 (T-1st)



X-FACTOR

Sophomore **Marial Shayok**'s case for earning minutes will be helped by his jumper. His 38.0% shooting from deep in 2014–15 is the best of any returning Cavalier after UVa lost last year's three-point leader, Justin Anderson.

TOURNAMENT TRACKER



HIGH-FLIER, LOW PROFILE

Many of **Anthony Gill**'s favorite plays begin with a miss. He's in some hostile ACC environment, fans riled to ear-splitting decibels, when one of his teammates clanks a shot off the rim. The 6' 8" senior forward grabs the rebound, then converts the putback or kicks it out to another Cavalier for a second-chance jumper. The effect: a satisfying atmospheric deflation. Says Gill, "I love to take the energy out of the building."

Few players in college basketball are more adept at initiating such crowd-displeasing displays than Gill, whose offensive rebound rate last season (15.5%) ranked 13th nationally and second in the ACC. "He's got the heart of a warrior on the glass," says coach **Tony Bennett**. "He won't be denied."

Gill's flash-free game does little to bolster his name recognition, especially on a team whose methodical pace limits his scoring (11.6 points per game last season) and that's best known for its stifling Pack-Line defense. Gill was only third-team All-ACC, but kenpom.com's advanced metrics placed him seventh in its national player of the year standings. He also ranked fourth in the country in win shares per 40 minutes, which measures a player's wide-ranging contributions to his team's victories. "I think he's gotten noticed by the right people," Bennett says, "and I think he will get more [attention] if he continues to play at that level." —*Dan Greene*

CHRIS KEANE FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (GILL); JOE ROBBINS/GETTY IMAGES (SHAYOK)

STAT SHEET With 2015-16 projections for the top six scorers

Coach **Tony Bennett** (7th season)

			PPG	RPG	APG	OFF. RATING	USAGE
SG	Malcolm Brogdon* 6' 5"	Sr.	14.4	4.8	2.5	110.7	24.9%
PF	Anthony Gill* 6' 8"	Sr.	12.9	7.3	1.0	117.2	25.0%
F-C	Mike Tobey* 7' 0"	Sr.	10.1	7.0	0.6	111.8	24.1%
PG	London Perrantes* 6' 2"	Jr.	7.8	2.9	4.7	110.4	16.6%
SF	Marial Shayok* 6' 5"	Soph.	6.3	3.1	1.4	104.3	18.2%
SF	Evan Nolte 6' 8"	Sr.	4.1	2.1	0.7	105.9	13.8%

*Starter

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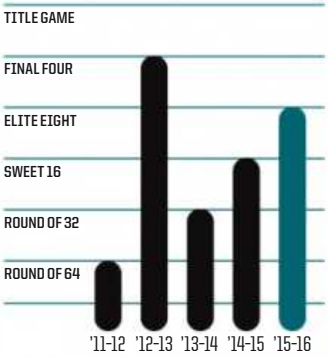
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7 | WICHITA STATE

PROJECTED TEAM STATS OFFENSIVE EFFICIENCY 114.0 (19th) DEFENSIVE EFFICIENCY 92.2 (3rd) MVC RECORD 16–2 (1st)

TOURNAMENT TRACKER





X-FACTOR

If 6' 11" senior **Tom (Bush) Wamukota** can play extended minutes at center, the Shockers can go bigger, with 6' 8" transfer Anton Grady at power forward. If not, look for 6' 4" Evan Wessel to start at the four and Grady at the five.

A ONE, AND A TWO, AND A THREE

When Team USA took a mix of pros and collegians to last summer's Pan-Am Games in Toronto, the top-performing amateur—and one of its best players, period—was Shockers senior guard **Ron Baker**. While potential player-of-the-year candidates such as Maryland's Melo Trimble, Virginia's Malcolm Brogdon and Michigan State's Denzel Valentine were relegated to lesser backcourt roles, Baker earned the most minutes of any collegian (24.2 per game) with his efficient offense (50.0% shooting and just one turnover in five games) and aggressive defense (a team-high seven steals).

The 6' 4", 210-pound Baker is a guard for all situations. At Wichita State, "Ron is the starting two, backup one and he can also play some three," says coach **Gregg Marshall**, "and he knows our system from all those positions like the back of his hand." Plus, when the Shockers' offense goes into ball-screen mode late in the shot clock—a scenario that should arise even more frequently this season with the clock shrinking to 30 seconds—Baker is a formidable weapon. As a junior he ranked second nationally in jump-shot efficiency off of ball screens, averaging 1.48 points over 48 possessions. And point guard **Fred VanVleet** is pushing Baker to get more touches in the mid-post, where he can isolate against less complete guards—which, at this point of Baker's career, describes nearly all of his opponents. *—Luke Winn*



DAVID E. KLUTHO FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (BAKER); PETER G. AIKEN/GETTY IMAGES (WAMUKOTA)

STAT SHEET With 2015-16 projections for the top six scorers

Coach Gregg Marshall (9th season)

			PPG	RPG	APG	OFF. RATING	USAGE
SG	Ron Baker* 6' 4" Sr.		14.8	4.4	2.8	120.1	22.3%
PG	Fred VanVleet* 6' 0" Sr.		14.0	3.9	5.4	121.1	24.9%
PF	Anton Grady* 6' 8" Sr.		9.6	6.6	1.7	103.5	23.0%
PG	Conner Frankamp 6' 1" Soph.		9.6	2.6	2.4	107.4	19.8%
SF	Zach Brown 6' 6" Soph.		7.3	3.6	0.8	109.8	18.0%
G-F	Evan Wessel* 6' 4" Sr.		5.5	4.2	0.8	116.2	13.0%

*Starter

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8 | VILLANOVA

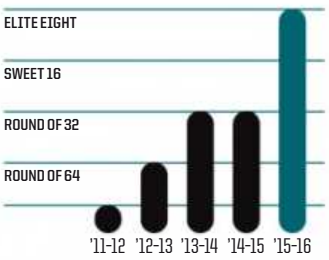
PROJECTED TEAM STATS OFFENSIVE EFFICIENCY 116.9 (6) DEFENSIVE EFFICIENCY 94.6 (33rd) BIG EAST RECORD 14–4 (1st)



X-FACTOR

As the sixth man last year **Josh Hart** averaged 10.1 points (tied for second on the team) and was MVP of the Big East tournament. But his defense and rebounding will be "pivotal" now that he's a starter, says coach Jay Wright.

TOURNAMENT TRACKER



ALL HE DOES IS DO IT ALL

Ryan Arcidiacono has been the Wildcats' most important player in each of his three seasons, even if most of the country hasn't noticed. But what the 6' 3" senior point guard lacks in flash, he makes up for in productivity and dependability. As a freshman he started every game, led the team in minutes and assists and was Villanova's second-leading scorer. Since then Arcidiacono has only gotten better. He earned Big East co–player of the year honors last season, in part because he has become more efficient (improving his assist to turnover ratio to nearly 3:1) as well as stronger and more active on defense. He enters this season as the unquestioned leader of a team that lost three key veterans in Darrun Hilliard, JayVaughn Pinkston and Dylan Ennis. He also leads a class that, with 21 more wins, will be the most successful in Villanova's 95-year history.

Coach **Jay Wright** plans to press and run more to compensate for their lack of height, which means an even greater load for Arch. "He really is like a coach on the floor," Wright says. "So in practice you don't have to spend time with him. You can develop the other guys. And in game situations, he's going to make the right play. Whatever it is." *—Ben Baskin*





MATT SLOCUM/AP (ARCIDIACONO); LAURENCE KESTERSON/AP (HART)

STAT SHEET With 2015-16 projections for the top six scorers

Coach **Jay Wright** (15th season)

			PPG	RPG	APG	OFF. RATING	USAGE
G-F	Josh Hart*	6' 5" Jr.	12.4	5.2	1.6	125.7	20.2%
PG	Ryan Arcidiacono*	6' 3" Sr.	11.9	2.5	3.8	116.6	20.1%
SG	Phil Booth*	6' 3" Soph.	10.3	2.7	2.1	122.7	19.8%
F	Daniel Ochefu*	6' 11" Sr.	10.0	8.4	1.6	114.4	21.8%
F	Kris Jenkins*	6' 6" Jr.	9.9	3.5	1.3	122.0	17.9%
PG	Jalen Brunson	6' 2" Fr.	8.8	2.8	3.2	107.4	21.7%

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9 | GONZAGA

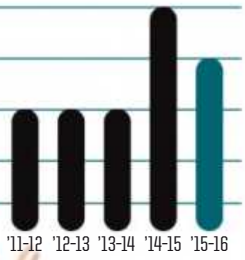
PROJECTED TEAM STATS OFFENSIVE EFFICIENCY 115.4 (12th) DEFENSIVE EFFICIENCY 94.2 (27th) WCC RECORD 16–2 (1st)



X-FACTOR

Eric McClellan started out at Tulsa, averaged 14.3 points in 12 games for Vanderbilt, then played 18 games for Gonzaga last season. The slashing combo guard will see time at all three perimeter spots this season.

TOURNAMENT TRACKER



WHAT'S THE BIG IDEA?

Mark Few knows most coaches would kill to have his problem: How to get the most out of three players, all 6' 10" or taller and All-America candidates? " 'Just play the three together' is sort of the simpleton take," says Few, "but it's hard to look back and see somebody who's played three 6' 10" or 6' 11" guys at the same time. We'll figure it out though."

Senior forward **Kyle Wiltjer**, a leading candidate for player of the year, can stretch the floor with his three-point shooting (46.6% in 2014–15), and he worked to get stronger in the off-season. Senior center **Przemek Karnowski** (10.9 points, 5.8 rebounds), a beast on the block, is one of the nation's most underrated players. And sophomore forward **Domantas Sabonis** has sticky hands, a high motor and an exceptional feel for the game. But what happens when opposing teams press them? How will they space the floor? And can Wiltjer, who's smooth and cerebral but not especially athletic, guard on the perimeter? His added strength will help him rebound more effectively, but he still lacks speed.

In each of his 16 seasons Few has tailored the offense to fit the Zags' strengths. As he waits for the backcourt to catch up—all three guard positions are open after the exits of Kevin Pangos, Gary Bell Jr. and Byron Wesley—he'll lean heavily on his big three. *—Lindsay Schnell*



GREG NELSON FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (WILTJER); JOHN W. MCDONOUGH FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (MCCLELLAN)

STAT SHEET With 2015-16 projections for the top six scorers

Coach Mark Few (17th season)

			PPG	RPG	APG	OFF. RATING	USAGE
PF	Kyle Wiltjer* 6' 10"	Sr.	21.0	7.4	2.1	127.9	26.0%
PF	Domantas Sabonis* 6' 11"	Soph.	12.9	8.2	1.1	119.5	22.2%
C	Przemek Karnowski* 7' 1"	Sr.	12.5	7.2	1.3	111.8	23.2%
PG	Josh Perkins* 6' 3"	Fr.	9.5	3.8	2.9	109.3	17.5%
SG	Silas Melson 6' 4"	Soph.	8.0	2.6	1.1	104.7	17.0%
SG	Eric McClellan 6' 4"	Sr.	7.5	2.8	1.6	108.7	17.0%

*Starters

10 | IOWA STATE

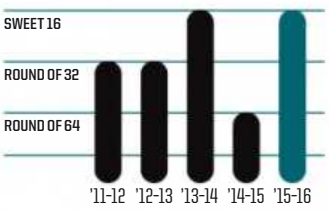
PROJECTED TEAM STATS OFFENSIVE EFFICIENCY 116.9 (7th) DEFENSIVE EFFICIENCY 96.1 (50th) BIG 12 RECORD 12–6 (T-2nd)



X-FACTOR

Monté Morris may be the best pass-first point guard in college basketball; his 4.6-to-1 assist-to-turnover ratio led the NCAA in '14–15. Morris must now seamlessly implement Steve Prohm's scheme on a squad packed with veterans.

TOURNAMENT TRACKER



IN THE DRIVER'S SEAT

When Murray State coach **Steve Prohm** agreed to replace Fred Hoiberg at Iowa State in June, the first player he planned to contact was 6' 8" senior forward **Georges Niang**—but Niang got Prohm's number first and beat him to the text.

Becoming a more proactive leader was Niang's main focus this off-season. A year after dropping about 25 pounds and cutting his body-fat percentage in half, Niang decided to exercise his mind as well. Each morning last summer, before hitting the weight room or the practice court, he sat in bed and read a chapter of *The Energy Bus*, a motivational book by Jon Gordon. "The first lesson is that you're in control of the energy on your bus," Niang says. "Positive energy drives whatever bus you're leading."

Prohm's goals for Niang reflect what the coach wants from his team: improved rebounding and defense. Last season the Cyclones were outside the top 100 in defensive rebounding percentage and in three-point D. A career 14.7-points-per-game scorer, Niang is productive in the post, but his offensive rating was below 90 in 12 games last season and above 130 in six. Hoping for a smoother final season, he's bearing the *Bus*'s final principle in mind: "Have fun and enjoy the ride." *—David Gardner*



DAVID E. KLUTHO FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (2)

STAT SHEET With 2015-16 projections for the top six scorers

Coach **Steve Prohm** (1st season)

			PPG	RPG	APG	OFF. RATING	USAGE
PF	Georges Niang*	6' 8" Sr.	16.6	5.7	3.8	111.3	27.0%
PG	Monté Morris*	6' 3" Jr.	13.4	3.7	5.4	126.0	19.0%
PF	Jameel McKay*	6' 9" Sr.	11.6	7.7	0.8	119.3	19.0%
SG	Naz Long*	6' 4" Sr.	10.7	3.3	2.1	116.5	16.3%
SF	Abdel Nader*	6' 6" Sr.	9.4	5.0	1.1	98.8	21.9%
SG	Matt Thomas	6' 4" Jr.	7.9	3.0	1.2	111.1	16.3%

*Starter

11 | ARIZONA

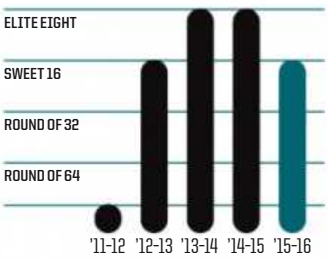
PROJECTED TEAM STATS OFFENSIVE EFFICIENCY 114.4 (17th) DEFENSIVE EFFICIENCY 94.1 (23rd) PAC-12 RECORD 13–5 (1st)



X-FACTOR

Coach Sean Miller sees sophomore **Parker Jackson-Cartwright**—who averaged just 9.6 minutes last season—as a "consummate pass-first" point guard with even more athleticism than departed star T.J. McConnell.

TOURNAMENT TRACKER



TRANSFER OF POWER

While sitting out last season after transferring from Boston College, **Ryan Anderson** overhauled his jump shot and cut his body fat to 5.8% from 18.5%. "My reputation was that I'm soft," says the 6' 9", 235-pound forward, who averaged 14.3 points in 2013–14. "I had a year to focus on [changing] that." Anderson will look a lot different, much like the Wildcats, who lost four players to the NBA over the past two seasons and have six new faces this year. Because no one on the roster projects as a first-round pick in 2016, Anderson shapes up as a go-to scorer on a balanced team. He'll showcase a more conventional jumper—he essentially shot with one hand at BC—to bolster his crafty mid-range game, and his added strength will help Arizona in the low post.

Four seniors will start, including Anderson, but all are inexperienced in their roles. **Kaleb Tarczewski** (9.3 points, 5.2 rebounds per game), a muscular 7-foot, 250-pound center, goes from defensive stopper to scoring threat. San Francisco graduate transfer **Mark Tollefsen** (14.0 points at USF), a 6' 9" stretch forward, will see if his 38.0% three-point shooting translates from the WCC. **Gabe York** (9.2 points) goes from supersub to starting sniper. As coach **Sean Miller** puts it, "Everyone has a new seat on the bus." —*Pete Thamel*



EMILY GALICIA/ARIZONA ATHLETICS (ANDERSON); ROBERT BECK FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (JACKSON-CARTWRIGHT)

STAT SHEET With 2015-16 projections for the top six scorers

Coach **Sean Miller** (7th season)

			PPG	RPG	APG	OFF. RATING	USAGE
SG	Gabe York*	6' 3" Sr.	12.3	2.8	1.8	120.7	18.8%
PF	Ryan Anderson*	6' 9" Sr.	11.9	6.7	1.0	108.3	24.4%
C	Kaleb Tarczewski*	7' 0" Sr.	11.6	6.8	0.6	117.1	19.6%
PG	P. Jackson-Cartwright*	5' 11" Soph.	9.8	3.6	4.7	112.7	20.9%
SG	Allonzo Trier	6' 6" Fr.	8.5	3.0	1.5	107.0	22.0%
SF	Mark Tollefsen	6' 9" Sr.	8.1	3.8	1.1	108.9	19.3%

*Starter

12 | OKLAHOMA

PROJECTED TEAM STATS | OFFENSIVE EFFICIENCY 112.3 (29th) | DEFENSIVE EFFICIENCY 92.5 (7th) | BIG 12 RECORD 12–6 (T-2nd)

TOURNAMENT TRACKER

TITLE GAME
FINAL FOUR
ELITE EIGHT
SWEET 16
ROUND OF 32
ROUND OF 64





X-FACTOR

Juco transfer **Akolda Manyang** has the size (7 feet, 243 pounds) and swatting skills (2.8 blocks last season) to contribute in the frontcourt rotation, as soon as he fully recovers from a stress fracture in his right foot.

CONFLICT RESOLUTION

In his fifth year of college, 6' 8" forward **Ryan Spangler** is learning an important lesson about himself. The Bridge Creek, Okla., native is enrolled in a graduate-level course on business conflicts. His takeaway? Engaging in confrontation is crucial to success. "I'm more of a passive type," Spangler says of his demeanor off the court. "But sometimes you've gotta be a little aggressive."

This self-description will come as news to fans in the Big 12, where Spangler has never been accused of being too deferential. His relentless play has made him one of the conference's most jeered visiting players. It has also made him indispensable to the Sooners. Last year he was their leading rebounder (8.2 per game), their top interior defender and an essential back line communicator on the nation's eighth-most-efficient D. Says coach **Lon Kruger**, "Ryan's [role] is pretty broad."

Spangler ranked third in the Big 12 in overall efficiency and spent last summer honing his jumper in an effort to expand both his range and repertoire. The Sooners already have a pair of high-level outside scorers in guards **Buddy Hield** and **Isaiah Cousins**; Spangler could spread the floor even more. "He'll step up there more comfortably and with more confidence," says Kruger. And with a bit more aggression too. *—Dan Greene*

STAT SHEET With 2015-16 projections for the top six scorers

Coach **Lon Kruger** (5th season)

		PPG	RPG	APG	OFF. RATING	USAGE
SG	**Buddy Hield*** 6' 4" Sr.	17.7	4.9	2.1	114.4	26.2%
SG	**Isaiah Cousins*** 6' 4" Sr.	12.9	4.6	2.6	106.5	21.2%
PF	**Ryan Spangler*** 6' 8" Sr.	11.2	9.6	1.5	123.4	16.8%
PG	**Jordan Woodard*** 6' 0" Jr.	10.7	3.1	4.3	108.4	20.1%
C	**Akolda Manyang** 7' 0" Jr.	7.0	5.0	0.5	104.7	21.3%
PF	**Khadeem Lattin*** 6' 9" Soph.	4.6	5.7	0.6	105.6	14.1%

*Starter

GREG NELSON FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (SPANGLER); OU ATHLETIC COMMUNICATIONS (MANYANG)

13 | CALIFORNIA

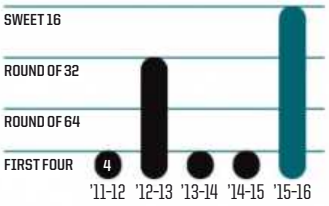
PROJECTED TEAM STATS OFFENSIVE EFFICIENCY 113.7 (21st) DEFENSIVE EFFICIENCY 94.3 (28th) PAC-12 RECORD 12–6 (T-2nd)



X-FACTOR

Stephen Domingo, a 6' 7" junior transfer, barely played at Georgetown, but he'll be a knockdown-lockdown specialist off the bench for the Bears. Not only can he stretch the floor, but he can also guard four positions.

TOURNAMENT TRACKER



RE-STARTING A TREND

The contrast of old-school ideals and new-age vibe was on display at a recent practice as coach **Cuonzo Martin** spent 10 minutes directing a hard-nosed defensive close-out drill while Rich Homie Quan provided the background music. The Bears' success this season will depend on just such a blend of old and new: They have the Pac-12's best returning player, 6' 5" senior point guard **Tyrone Wallace**, and the conference's top NBA prospect, 6' 7" freshman wing **Jaylen Brown**.

Expect Cal to attempt to recapture the up-tempo magic Jason Kidd brought to Haas Pavilion in the early 1990s. Everything starts with Wallace, who spent his summer polishing his pull-up game, adding 12 pounds of muscle and addressing his poor foul shooting (59.8% for his career). He averaged a team-high 4.0 assists last year and should blow past that mark. "With the weapons we have," Wallace says, "it's easy to dish the ball off."

Brown, a slasher who can finish through contact with ease, will serve as his top new target. Both he and five-star freshman forward **Ivan Rabb** have bought into Martin's defense-first philosophy, which has helped them jell with junior guards **Jabari Bird** and **Jordan Mathews**. Veteran savvy and fresh talent should send Cal to its first Sweet 16 since 1997. —P.T.



KIN RAFF/AP (WALLACE); JOHN TODD/ISIPHOTOS.COM (DOMINGO)

STAT SHEET With 2015-16 projections for the top six scorers

Coach **Cuonzo Martin** (2nd season)

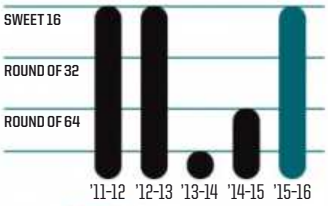
		PPG	RPG	APG	OFF. RATING	USAGE
SF	Jaylen Brown* 6' 7" Fr.	16.8	6.3	1.7	113.0	26.5%
PG	Tyrone Wallace* 6' 5" Sr.	14.3	5.6	3.4	107.0	26.0%
SG	Jordan Mathews* 6' 4" Jr.	12.9	3.0	1.4	117.8	21.0%
PF	Ivan Rabb* 6' 11" Fr.	11.2	7.3	0.9	121.0	20.0%
SG	Jabari Bird* 6' 6" Jr.	10.6	3.7	1.8	120.1	18.0%
SG	Stephen Domingo 6' 7" Jr.	6.1	3.3	1.3	102.9	15.7%

*Starter

14 | INDIANA

PROJECTED TEAM STATS OFFENSIVE EFFICIENCY 120.4 (1st) DEFENSIVE EFFICIENCY 99.9 (113th) BIG TEN RECORD 12–6 (T-2nd)

TOURNAMENT TRACKER





X-FACTOR

Indiana finished last in the Big Ten in field goal percentage defense, allowing 45.3% shooting. The Hoosiers will count on center **Thomas Bryant**, a top 30 recruit, to protect the rim and prevent easy buckets.

BEAR NECESSITY

Senior guard **Kevin (Yogi) Ferrell** arrived at Big Ten media day in October with a battle wound. Three thin strips of tape covered a cut near his right eye, the result of butting heads with forward **Troy Williams** during a drill. Ferrell needed medical attention, but he didn't need an apology. "I don't want him to be soft," he says of his 6' 7" teammate. "It's the game."

The 6-foot Ferrell has come to appreciate hard knocks. As a freshman he started on a 29-win team that earned a No. 1 seed in the NCAA tournament; since then the Hoosiers have just 16 conference victories. This winter, though, they could approach that two-year total, led by three double-digit scorers—Ferrell, Williams and guard **James Blackmon Jr.**—and 6' 10" freshman **Thomas Bryant**, a four-star recruit.

Adept at dribbling out of trouble, Ferrell can work the baseline to draw defenses and find shooters. He can also score: Last season he averaged 16.3 points and shot a career-best 41.6% from three-point range. And he showed his improved athleticism last month by dunking on his 6' 3" strength coach during a practice. Now Ferrell needs to take all that he's learned from good times and bad and apply it. "He can run a team," coach **Tom Crean** says. "Will he run it consistently the way it needs to be run? And will he help inspire his teammates to have great confidence? That's the key." —B.H.

STAT SHEET With 2015-16 projections for the top six scorers

Coach **Tom Crean** (8th season)

			PPG	RPG	APG	OFF. RATING	USAGE
PG	Yogi Ferrell*	6' 0" Sr.	16.2	2.9	5.1	127.2	23.1%
SG	James Blackmon Jr.*	6' 4" Soph.	15.7	4.8	1.7	117.9	24.6%
SF	Troy Williams*	6' 7" Jr.	11.9	6.2	1.6	116.6	24.5%
SG	Robert Johnson*	6' 3" Soph.	9.1	2.9	2.0	112.7	18.6%
F-C	Thomas Bryant*	6' 10" Fr.	8.6	6.0	0.8	108.3	18.2%
PF	Max Bielfeldt	6' 8" Sr.	8.2	4.9	0.8	134.9	12.7%

*Starter

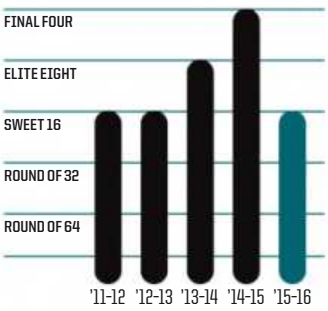


GREG NELSON FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (FERRELL); IU MEDIA RELATIONS (BRYANT)

15 | MICHIGAN STATE

PROJECTED TEAM STATS OFFENSIVE EFFICIENCY 114.5 (16th) DEFENSIVE EFFICIENCY 95.2 (42nd) BIG TEN RECORD 12–6 (T-2nd)

TOURNAMENT TRACKER





X-FACTOR

Gavin Schilling's inconsistency and poor free throw shooting (47.9% last year) have limited his minutes. But during the team's summer trip to Italy, he scored 17 points in two of the three games and averaged 7.0 rebounds.

FROM TRAGIC TO MAGIC

Growing up, **Denzel Valentine** had a small forward's body and a point guard's skills, prompting comparisons to another prodigy from Lansing, Mich. But at Michigan State, the comparisons became far less apt. "I used to say he's trying to be like Magic Johnson, but he's more like Tragic Johnson," coach **Tom Izzo** says. "He just turned the ball over so much. He wasn't making bad decisions. He was trying to be too fancy."

Now a 6' 5" senior guard, Valentine has reversed that tragic trajectory. Last season he was the only player in the Big Ten to rank in the top 15 in points (14.5), rebounds (6.3) and assists (4.3); he also hit 41.6% of his threes. Led by Valentine, the seventh-seeded Spartans took a surprise trip to the Final Four—especially impressive considering that he was battling two sports hernias that required surgery last April.

Valentine will play alongside **Eron Harris**, a 6' 3" junior transfer from West Virginia (42.2% on three-pointers as a sophomore), and 6' 3" senior **Bryn Forbes** (42.7% last season) to form the best long-range trio in the country. The roster is deep (eight players have started at least once) and talented (see 6' 10" freshman **Deyonta Davis**). Valentine's final season could be headed for a magical ending. —S.D.



AL TIELEMANS FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (VALENTINE); AL GOLDIS/AP (SCHILLING)

STAT SHEET With 2015-16 projections for the top six scorers

Coach **Tom Izzo** (21st season)

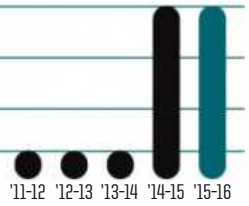
		PPG	RPG	APG	OFF. RATING	USAGE
G	**Denzel Valentine*** 6' 5" Sr.	16.4	7.2	4.8	113.8	24.2%
SG	**Eron Harris** 6' 3" Jr.	11.1	3.1	1.3	108.5	23.7%
SG	**Bryn Forbes*** 6' 3" Sr.	9.9	2.2	1.1	118.3	16.6%
PF	**Matt Costello*** 6' 9" Sr.	9.8	6.8	1.1	121.2	19.0%
SF	**Marvin Clark Jr.*** 6' 6" Soph.	8.0	3.8	0.6	108.2	21.4%
PF	**Deyonta Davis** 6' 10" Fr.	7.6	5.5	0.7	103.0	20.0%

*Starter

16 | UTAH

PROJECTED TEAM STATS OFFENSIVE EFFICIENCY 112.3 (30th) DEFENSIVE EFFICIENCY 93.4 (13th) PAC-12 RECORD 12–6 (T-2nd)

TOURNAMENT TRACKER





X-FACTOR

Kyle Kuzma, a 6' 9", 210-pound sophomore, played sparingly as a freshman, but he's one of the team's best passers and a good two-way rebounder. Defenders will have a tough time when he takes the court with Jakob Poeltl.

BALANCING ACT

The Utes caught a big break when **Jakob Poeltl**, a 7-foot forward from Vienna, Austria, and a likely first-round pick, put off the NBA to return for his sophomore season. Poeltl averaged a respectable 9.1 points and 6.8 rebounds in just 23.3 minutes last year even though he spent long stretches on the bench in foul trouble. Coach **Larry Krystkowiak** watched footage of every one of those fouls with Poeltl—who was whistled four or more times in nine games—and taught him to lower his center of gravity. Packing on 14 pounds of muscle (he's up to 249) will also help. If he's not getting pushed around so easily, Krystkowiak says, Poeltl won't need to reach and pick up silly fouls.

While Poetl shot a Pac-12-leading 68.1% from the field last season, he relied on length and quickness to get around defenders; the added bulk will enable him to power through them. He also spent the summer learning to take more balanced shots (so that he's in position to rebound his own misses), improving his form at the foul line (where he shot a team-worst 44.4%) and perfecting two go-to moves (a skyhook and a simple counter).

The Utes lost their other experienced big men when 7-foot Dallin Bachynski graduated and 6' 10" Jeremy Olsen retired because of hip and back injuries. That makes it all the more important for Poeltl to stay on the floor and be a force inside. —L.S.



STAT SHEET With 2015-16 projections for the top six scorers

Coach **Larry Krystkowiak** (5th season)

			PPG	RPG	APG	OFF. RATING	USAGE
F-C	**Jakob Poeltl***	7' 0" Soph.	12.4	8.1	0.9	114.0	22.7%
PG	**Brandon Taylor***	5' 10" Sr.	12.2	2.2	3.7	115.5	19.2%
F	**Jordan Loveridge***	6' 6" Sr.	10.9	4.2	1.4	112.2	20.8%
PF	**Brekkot Chapman**	6' 8" Soph.	9.2	4.1	0.6	109.7	21.5%
SF	**Dakarai Tucker***	6' 5" Sr.	8.5	2.5	0.8	114.6	17.5%
G	**Lorenzo Bonam***	6' 4" Jr.	6.1	3.0	1.9	98.3	19.5%

*Starter

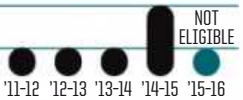
GREG NELSON FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (POELTL); RICK BOWMER/AP (KUZMA)

17 | SMU

PROJECTED TEAM STATS OFFENSIVE EFFICIENCY 112.7 (27th) DEFENSIVE EFFICIENCY 93.7 (16th) AAC RECORD 14–4 (T-1st)

TOURNAMENT TRACKER

TITLE GAME
FINAL FOUR
ELITE EIGHT
SWEET 16
ROUND OF 32
ROUND OF 64





X-FACTOR

Sweet-shooting guard **Keith Frazier** (44.9 FG%) will be a primary option in the offense, but how will the 6' 5" junior handle the emotional burden of being the focal point of the NCAA's academic fraud case against the school?

MOORE, SETTLING FOR LESS

Nic Moore had every reason to be optimistic about his senior season. The 5' 9" point guard and reigning American Athletic Conference player of the year joined Kansas at the World University Games in South Korea in July. Averaging 6.8 points, he helped the squad win gold, then rejoined the Mustangs, who retain four of the top five scorers from the team that broke the school's 22-year NCAA tournament drought.

But in September the NCAA banned SMU from postseason play for a variety of rules violations. That disappointment aside, Moore is poised for an All-America season. He led the Mustangs in points (14.5 per game), assists (5.1) and steals (1.3) last year, while shooting a conference-best 41.6% from beyond the arc and 88.9% from the line. "Nic isn't fast, but he's quick. He has a real high IQ and he's exceptionally strong," coach **Larry Brown** says. "We're really going to need his leadership."

SMU will be smaller overall, increasing the load on sturdy 6' 9" forward **Markus Kennedy**, who was the AAC's sixth man of the year in '14–15. Moore will spearhead a deep perimeter corps that will be bolstered by **Malik (Shake) Milton**, a highly rated 6' 5" freshman. But after guiding the Mustangs to March Madness for the first time since 1993, Moore won't have the chance to deliver their first tournament win since '88. —S.D.



GREG NELSON FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (MOORE); RONALD MARTINEZ/GETTY IMAGES (FRAZIER)

STAT SHEET With 2015-16 projections for the top six scorers

Coach **Larry Brown** (4th season)

		PPG	RPG	APG	OFF. RATING	USAGE
PG	Nic Moore* 5' 9" Sr.	14.3	1.8	5.0	116.1	22.5%
PF	Markus Kennedy* 6' 9" Sr.	12.1	7.1	1.3	111.5	25.6%
SG	Keith Frazier* 6' 5" Jr.	11.7	4.2	1.6	116.8	18.9%
PF	Jordan Tolbert 6' 7" Sr.	8.6	5.3	0.6	109.7	21.3%
PF	Ben Moore* 6' 8" Jr.	8.4	5.6	1.8	108.5	21.4%
SF	Sterling Brown* 6' 6" Jr.	6.6	5.2	2.1	122.5	13.9%

*Starter

18 | GEORGETOWN

PROJECTED TEAM STATS OFFENSIVE EFFICIENCY 113.0 (24th) DEFENSIVE EFFICIENCY 94.1 (22nd) BIG EAST RECORD 12–6 (T-2nd)

TOURNAMENT TRACKER

TITLE GAME

FINAL FOUR

ELITE EIGHT

SWEET 16

ROUND OF 32

ROUND OF 64





X-FACTOR

Freshman **Jessie Govan**, a 6' 10", 270-pound center, should have no problem acclimating to the physicality of the college game. "He can go on the block right now and score with either hand," coach John Thompson III says.

THE HOYA WHO'LL ANNOY YA

That sound you heard on April 7 was the Hoyas' faithful breathing a collective sigh of relief as **D'Vauntes Smith-Rivera** removed his name from NBA draft consideration. Once the 6' 3" combo guard, among the best perimeter scorers in the NCAA, decided to return for his senior year, Georgetown once again became a front-runner for a Big East title and a threat to go deep into the NCAA tournament.

The knock on Smith-Rivera from pro scouts is that he is a tweener—too small for his natural position at shooting guard, and with too strong a shoot-first mentality to play point—but he is an absolute terror for college defenses. While also lauding his leadership and basketball IQ, coach **John Thompson III** sums up Smith-Rivera's worth in simple terms: "At the end of the day we can put the ball in his hands, and he will score."

For the last two seasons Smith-Rivera has carried the Hoyas' offense, averaging 16.9 points in 34.9 minutes and shooting 39.0% from deep. Adept at connecting both off the dribble and on the catch, he's also comfortable attacking the rim and getting to the line, where he shot 86.1% in 2014–15.

As Smith-Rivera enters the season, he has one priority, and it's not improving his draft stock. "[NBA teams] can see what I bring to the table," he says. "The only thing I'm going to focus on is continuing to win." —B.B.



STAT SHEET With 2015-16 projections for the top six scorers

Coach **John Thompson III** (10th season)

			PPG	RPG	APG	OFF. RATING	USAGE
G	D'Vauntes Smith-Rivera*	6' 3" Sr.	17.8	4.5	3.1	121.3	24.2%
PF	Isaac Copeland*	6' 9" Soph.	11.0	6.0	1.0	109.9	20.1%
G-F	L.J. Peak*	6' 5" Soph.	10.1	3.3	1.2	102.9	20.5%
C	Jessie Govan*	6' 10" Fr.	8.4	5.7	0.8	102.7	20.1%
F	Paul White*	6' 8" Soph.	7.2	3.7	1.4	107.4	18.4%
PG	Tre Campbell	6' 2" Soph.	6.2	2.0	1.7	111.3	15.0%

*Starter

ROBERT BECK FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (SMITH-RIVERA); ELIO CASTORIO (GOVAN)

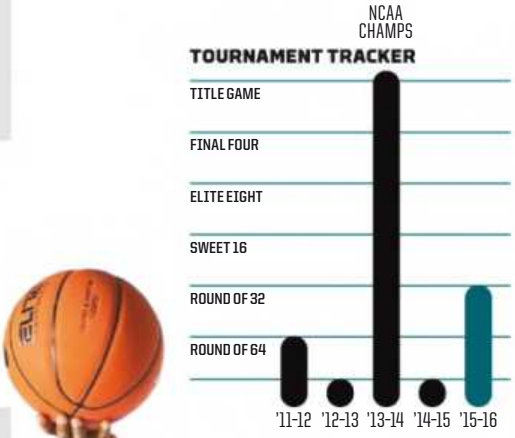
19 | UCONN

PROJECTED TEAM STATS OFFENSIVE EFFICIENCY 111.4 (35th) DEFENSIVE EFFICIENCY 92.7 (9th) AAC RECORD 14–4 (T-1st)



X-FACTOR

Rodney Purvis struggled on offense after transferring from N.C. State, but he did average 16.7 points over his final nine games, scoring a career-high 29 in a loss to SMU in the AAC tournament final.



GETTING OLDER

In 2014–15 the Huskies became the ninth team to miss out on the NCAA tournament the year after winning a title. "We lost five games on the last possession. Five!" says coach **Kevin Ollie**, who knew UConn didn't just need to get better this season—it also needed to get more savvy. He accomplished both goals by signing graduate transfers **Sterling Gibbs**, a 6' 2" combo guard from Seton Hall, and **Shonn Miller**, a 6' 7" power forward from Cornell.

These are plum additions for a team that was already retaining 66.7% of its scoring and 78.2% of its rebounding. Miller's burly frame and midrange touch should complement the skills of 7-foot junior center **Amida Brimah**, who last season ranked second nationally in blocks (3.5 per game) despite habitual foul trouble. Gibbs, meanwhile, will try to enter the pantheon of undersized guards who have won titles at UConn (Khalid El-Amin, Ben Gordon, Kemba Walker, Shabazz Napier).

Gibbs spent much of his summer picking Ollie's brain about the finer points of point guard leadership. If Gibbs and Miller can pass along what they've learned to their younger teammates, the Huskies will be back to their old-school ways. —S.D.



STEVE SLADE/UCONN ATHLETICS (GIBBS); CLOE POISSON/HARTFORD COURANT/TNS/GETTY IMAGES (PURVIS)

STAT SHEET With 2015-16 projections for the top six scorers

Coach **Kevin Ollie** (4th season)

			PPG	RPG	APG	OFF. RATING	USAGE
SF	**Daniel Hamilton*** 6' 7"	Soph.	12.7	7.1	3.0	103.7	26.0%
SG	**Rodney Purvis*** 6' 4"	Jr.	12.4	2.8	1.4	105.1	23.9%
PG	**Sterling Gibbs*** 6' 2"	GS	11.6	2.2	3.5	110.2	22.0%
C	**Amida Brimah*** 7' 0"	Jr.	8.9	5.0	0.4	122.1	15.8%
PG	**Jalen Adams** 6' 3"	Fr.	8.5	3.1	3.3	108.4	21.0%
PF	**Shonn Miller*** 6' 7"	GS	8.2	5.2	0.8	106.6	19.1%

*Starter

20 | TEXAS

PROJECTED TEAM STATS OFFENSIVE EFFICIENCY 113.0 (23rd) DEFENSIVE EFFICIENCY 94.9 (38th) BIG 12 RECORD 11–7 (4th)

TOURNAMENT TRACKER

TITLE GAME

FINAL FOUR

ELITE EIGHT

SWEET 16

ROUND OF 32

ROUND OF 64





X-FACTOR

Connor Lammert was the Longhorns' glue guy last year, and now the 6' 10" stretch forward will be counted on to hit clutch threes. Coach Shaka Smart expects Lammert's rate to rise dramatically from the 29.5% he hit in 2014–15.

A NEW MIND-SET

At VCU, **Shaka Smart** built his Havoc defense around quickness. In **Isaiah Taylor**, the Longhorns' new coach has one of the fastest players in college basketball. Yet Smart wants the 6' 3" junior point guard to cool his jets occasionally—at least on offense. "Sometimes what's needed is to shift down from fifth gear to third," Smart says. "He's learning that." Taylor averaged 13.1 points and 4.6 assists last season, but made only 40.1% of his field goal attempts because he tried too hard to break down defenses and wound up forcing shots. Taylor's focus this year will be creating high-quality looks for teammates. He'll get help on the perimeter from **Demarcus Holland**, a hard-nosed senior, and freshman **Eric Davis Jr.**, an opportunistic scorer with range.

Smart expects the Longhorns to play like his 2011 Final Four squad at VCU, which relied more on zone D and hit an NCAA tournament record 61 three-pointers. Last season under Rick Barnes, who's now at Tennessee, the Longhorns ranked seventh in the Big 12 (and 212th nationally) in threes. "We're not going to press every single possession, we're not going to trap as much," says Smart. "But we're still going to play with a level of energy and togetherness. That's really what Havoc was about. It's a mind-set more so than X's and O's." —*Thayer Evans*



STAT SHEET With 2015-16 projections for the top six scorers

Coach **Shaka Smart** (1st season)

			PPG	RPG	APG	OFF. RATING	USAGE
PG	Isaiah Taylor* 6' 3" Jr.		14.3	3.9	4.5	106.1	25.9%
C	Cameron Ridley* 6' 10" Sr.		11.4	8.0	0.5	110.7	22.5%
PG	Javan Felix 5' 11" Sr.		9.3	1.9	2.2	109.6	21.7%
SG	Eric Davis Jr. 6' 2" Fr.		7.6	3.1	1.5	103.0	19.5%
PF	Connor Lammert* 6' 10" Sr.		7.0	6.8	1.4	113.8	15.4%
SG	Demarcus Holland* 6' 3" Sr.		6.4	3.1	2.0	106.1	16.7%

*Starter

GREG NELSON FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (TAYLOR); CHRIS COVATTA/GETTY IMAGES (LAMMERT)

Scouti



WOMEN'S

Top 5

1 UConn
2 Notre Dame
3 Tennessee
4 South Carolina
5 Baylor

CONNECTICUT IS THE TEAM TO BEAT (AGAIN). BUT FOUR POTENT TEAMS STAND IN THE WAY OF A FOURTH STRAIGHT TITLE

ng Reports



UCONN QUEST
Two-time player of the year Breanna Stewart (30) spent the summer preparing for the challenge of an unprecedented four-peat.

Photograph by
Chris Keane
For Sports Illustrated

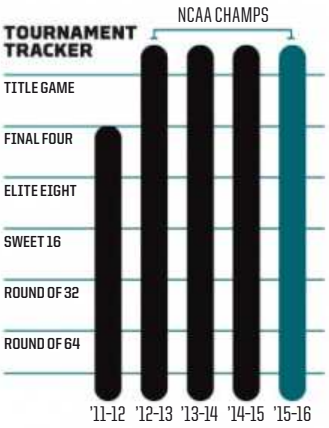
1 | UCONN

TEAM STATS SCORING OFFENSE 89.3 (1st) SCORING DEFENSE 48.6 (1st) AAC RECORD 18–0 (1st)



X-FACTOR

Finally fully recovered from knee surgeries in 2013 and '14, 6' 2" junior forward **Morgan Tuck** should get the recognition her play deserves. Tuck's 19.2 points (on 60.8% shooting) led UConn during the 2015 NCAA tournament.



NO SURPRISES IN STORRS

As they traveled through Europe in October as part of a U.S. national team pre-Olympic tour, UConn coach **Geno Auriemma** and star senior forward **Breanna Stewart** continued a conversation that started the month before. "We talked about all the distractions and all the drama with wanting to win four national championships and do something no other college kid has done before," Auriemma says. "We talked about all the hoopla surrounding the WNBA draft [in which Stewart is the likely No. 1 pick]. We talked about all of those things so there are no surprises this year."

What would be a surprise? The Huskies not re-re-repeating as champion. Along with the multifaceted Stewart, a two-time national player of the year, they have All-America point guard **Moriah Jefferson** (4.9 assists per game, 49.6% from three-point range) and the nation's top recruit, 6' 3" **Katie Lou Samuelson**, a sharpshooting wing who has Stewart's lanky, long-armed build. "If we are going to win a national championship, Katie Lou is going to be a big part of that, believe me," Auriemma says.

Auriemma has already addressed his team about what it will take to make history for seniors Stewart and Jefferson. "I think the biggest motivator for us," he says, "is we are the only team in America that wants us to win."

—Richard Deitsch



L M OTERO/AP (2)

LINEUP With 2014-15 stats

Coach **Geno Auriemma** (31st season)

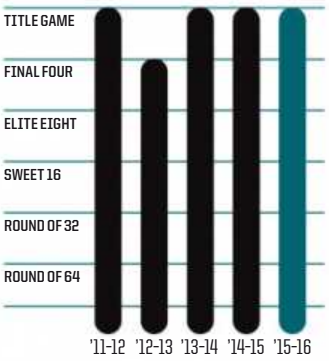
			PPG	RPG	APG	FG%	FT%
PG	**Moriah Jefferson** 5' 7"	Sr.	12.4	2.9	4.9	58.7	84.3
SG	**Kia Nurse** 6' 0"	Soph.	10.2	3.1	2.8	48.6	72.2
G	**Gabby Williams** 5' 11"	Soph.	8.3	5.7	1.3	63.7	80.5
F	**Breanna Stewart** 6' 4"	Sr.	17.6	7.8	3.1	53.9	75.0
F	**Morgan Tuck** 6' 2"	Jr.	14.4	5.5	2.9	59.6	46.2
G-F	**Katie Lou Samuelson*** 6' 3"	Fr.	29.2	8.6	2.0	62.2	89.4

*High school stats

2 | NOTRE DAME

TEAM STATS SCORING OFFENSE 79.8 (5th) SCORING DEFENSE 59.8 (72nd) ACC RECORD 15–1 (1st)

TOURNAMENT TRACKER





X-FACTOR

Brianna Turner, a 6' 3" forward with guard skills, led the nation in field goal percentage (65.2) last season and had a team-high 89 blocks. She scored 17 points in the national semifinals (a 66–65 win over South Carolina).

SCORING OPTIONS ABOUND

Four starters are back from a team that reached the national championship game last April, so if you think coach **Muffet McGraw** is worried about losing guard Jewell Loyd's 19.8 points, think again. "The easiest things to replace are offensive stats," McGraw says.

That's easy to say when you have a point guard as talented as junior **Lindsay Allen**, who has more assists through two seasons (355) than any player in school history. She'll be passing to preseason All-America 6' 3" sophomore forward **Brianna Turner** and lightning-quick 6' 4" junior forward **Taya Reimer**, who are reliable scorers both in the paint and on the perimeter. The Irish also have a freshman class stacked with top 20 recruits, including 5' 8" **Arike (Rico) Ogunbowale**, a powerful point guard who will contribute immediately on both ends of the floor, and deadeye shooting guard **Marina Mabrey**, the younger sister of senior guard **Michaela**.

The Irish have dominated the ACC, winning 37 of 38 games since joining the conference two seasons ago, and they're gunning for their sixth straight Final Four. They face UConn in Storrs on Dec. 5, a rematch of the last two title games and an interesting test for both teams. Win or lose, McGraw will know what—if anything—she should be worried about. —R.D.



BRIAN BLANCO/GETTY IMAGES (ALLEN); CHRIS WILLIAMS/ICON SPORTSWIRE (TURNER)

LINEUP With 2014-15 stats

Coach **Muffet McGraw** (29th season)

			PPG	RPG	APG	FG%	FT%
PG	**Lindsay Allen** 5' 8"	Jr.	10.4	3.5	5.3	52.2	85.4
G	**Michaela Mabrey** 5' 10"	Sr.	7.2	1.9	2.4	38.3	95.0
G	**Madison Cable** 5' 10"	Sr.	6.2	4.1	0.9	45.2	84.2
F	**Brianna Turner** 6' 3"	Soph.	13.8	7.9	0.7	65.2	60.5
F	**Taya Reimer** 6' 4"	Jr.	10.2	6.1	1.9	51.6	63.0
F	**Kathryn Westbeld** 6' 2"	Soph.	6.7	4.4	1.6	52.6	71.1

3 | TENNESSEE

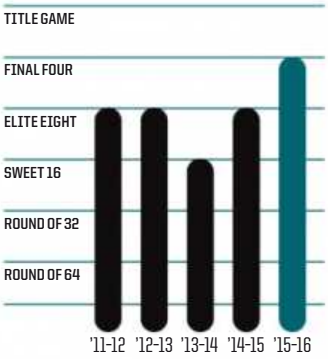
TEAM STATS SCORING OFFENSE 71.3 (47th) SCORING DEFENSE 56.3 (24th) SEC RECORD 15–1 (T-1st)



X-FACTOR

Jasmine Jones, who played just seven games last year due to concussionlike symptoms, is Tennessee's best defender and best athlete. The 6' 2" junior forward showed signs of becoming a scoring threat, improving to 9.4 ppg (from 4.8).

TOURNAMENT TRACKER



A COUPLE OF HAPPY RETURNS

Losing three veterans to graduation was tough for coach **Holly Warlick**, but it's easier to say goodbye when you can welcome back two of the best players in the country. **Diamond DeShields** sat out last season after transferring from North Carolina, where she averaged 18.0 points, 5.4 rebounds, 2.6 assists and 1.7 steals and earned national freshman of the year honors for leading the Tar Heels to the Elite Eight. The daughter of former major leaguer Delino DeShields, she plays with an effortless athleticism that reminds Warlick of former Tennessee great Chamique Holdsclaw. The 6' 1" DeShields is especially deft at leading the break and delivering in the open floor.

Mercedes Russell will be more than happy to fill the lane—now that she's running pain-free. The 6' 6" sophomore, who missed last season after undergoing surgery on both feet, excels in the paint, where she's equally dangerous with her back to the basket or facing up. Russell is also one of the best passing bigs in the country, lauded for her hoops IQ. The Lady Vols pride themselves on their inside-out offense; opposing coaches will be searching for new defensive schemes to stop them. *—Lindsay Schnell*



TIM GANGLOFF/CSM/LANDOV (RUSSELL); DONALD PAGE/TENNESSEE ATHLETICS/COLLEGIATE IMAGES/GETTY IMAGES (JONES)

LINEUP With 2014-15 stats

Coach **Holly Warlick** (4th season)

		PPG	RPG	APG	FG%	FT%
G	Andraya Carter 5' 9" Jr.	7.7	3.1	2.1	38.9	67.9
G	Jordan Reynolds 5' 11" Jr.	7.3	3.6	2.3	37.5	79.4
G	Diamond DeShields* 6' 1" Soph.	18.0	5.4	2.5	42.6	77.6
F	Bashaara Graves 6' 2" Sr.	10.6	7.0	2.0	50.4	74.0
C	Mercedes Russell† 6' 6" Soph.	6.3	5.0	0.5	59.6	51.4
F	Jasmine Jones 6' 2" Jr.	9.4	4.6	1.0	43.1	62.5

*2013-14 stats at UNC
†2013-14 stats at Tennessee

4 | SOUTH CAROLINA

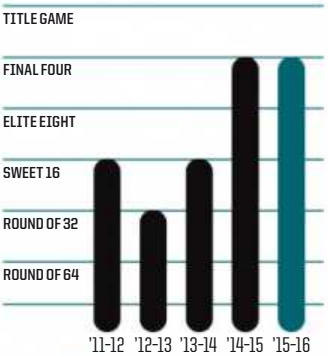
TEAM STATS SCORING OFFENSE 75.9 (18th) SCORING DEFENSE 54.1 (12th) SEC RECORD 15–1 (T-1st)



X-FACTOR

Khadijah Sessions is a terror on D (a team-leading 68 steals last year) but can be a liability on O (31.3% from deep). The 5' 8" senior has worked on her jump shot, hoping to make defenses pay when they sag off.

TOURNAMENT TRACKER



A NEW WAY TO INFLICT MISERY

Dawn Staley has used a relentless defense to become the most successful coach in school history, and now that she has a team that could go 14 deep, she's decided she might as well run opponents off the floor too. "You look at top-notch programs, they play at a different pace," Staley says. "We want to see if we can create an edge in transition." That's welcome news for All-America senior point guard **Tiffany Mitchell**, who can create a shot anywhere, anytime.

To accommodate bigger players who were more comfortable in half-court sets, Mitchell had to go slow last season. Those bigs have graduated, leaving the ones who are ready to fill the lanes and finish: 6' 4" junior **Alaina Coates** (who is playing the "best basketball of her life," according to Staley), 6' 4" sophomore **Jatarie White** and 6' 2" Virginia transfer **Sarah Imovbioh**. Then there's the SEC's freshman of the year in 2014–15, 6' 5" **A'ja Wilson**, who can not only grab a rebound but also lead the break. In the half-court Wilson is even more of a menace, with an arsenal of moves on the block and the ability to score with either hand.

The Gamecocks will always live off their suffocating D—last season opponents shot just 34.9% from the floor. Now their offense will demoralize teams in a new way.

—L.S.



TRAVIS BELL/AP (WILSON); RICHARD SHIRO/AP (SESSIONS)

LINEUP With 2014-15 stats

Coach **Dawn Staley** (8th season)

			PPG	RPG	APG	FG%	FT%
PG	**Tiffany Mitchell** 5' 9"	Sr.	14.4	3.1	2.9	50.0	83.8
G	**Khadijah Sessions** 5' 8"	Sr.	4.5	2.4	2.8	40.1	52.9
G-F	**Asia Dozier** 6' 0"	Sr.	4.0	1.0	1.8	41.4	76.9
F	**A'ja Wilson** 6' 5"	Soph.	13.1	6.6	1.0	53.8	66.2
C	**Alaina Coates** 6' 4"	Jr.	11.1	7.9	0.8	56.2	69.6
G	**Bianca Cuevas** 5' 6"	Soph.	5.6	1.3	1.7	37.0	77.6

5 | BAYLOR

TEAM STATS

SCORING OFFENSE 79.5 (7th)

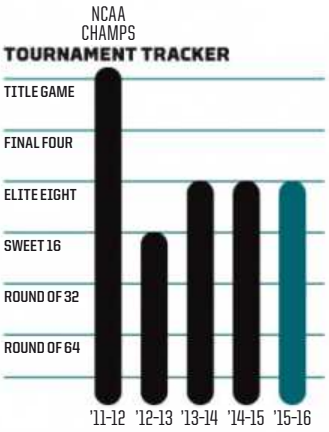
SCORING DEFENSE 59.0 (59th)

BIG 12 RECORD 16–2 (1st)



X-FACTOR

As a Duke sophomore in 2013–14, 5' 9" **Alexis Jones** averaged 13.1 points and 5.3 assists before tearing her left ACL in February. Now fully recovered, the junior will see time at both guard spots and on the wing.



DEPTH CHARGE

The Lady Bears are going to be big. How big? Coach **Kim Mulkey** says it's the tallest roster she's had in her 16 years in Waco, and she coached 6' 8" Brittney Griner for four seasons. Even with all of that size, though, Baylor's two best players are on the shorter side. Senior 5' 8" point guard **Niya Johnson** led the nation in assists (8.9 per game), while 5' 11" junior forward and Big 12 player of the year **Nina Davis** is the country's best undersized post scorer. She led the conference in scoring (21.1 points) and double doubles (12). "You sit on the bench and think, How did she just hit that shot?" says Mulkey. "I know it doesn't always look pretty, but it goes in."

The infusion of height comes largely from the highly touted freshman class, which includes the top-rated center, 6' 7" **Kalani Brown**; 6' 4" **Beatrice Mompremier**; and 6' 3" **Justis Szczepanski**. The Lady Bears' last two seasons have ended in the Elite Eight (both times with losses to Notre Dame), but Mulkey believes they now have Final Four talent. While she usually shortens her rotation during conference play and the NCAA tournament, Mulkey has visions of going nine deep this year. "If we end up with that kind of rotation," she says, "we are probably going to be pretty darn good." —R.D.



SUE OGROCKI/AP (JOHNSON); BAYLOR MARKETING AND COMMUNICATIONS (JONES)

LINEUP With 2014-15 stats

Coach **Kim Mulkey** (16th season)

			PPG	RPG	APG	FG%	FT%
PG	Niya Johnson 5' 8" Sr.		7.3	5.0	8.9	41.7	79.6
SG	Kristy Wallace 5' 11" Soph.		8.1	2.6	2.3	40.8	65.7
SG	Alexis Prince 6' 1" Jr.		8.6	4.1	1.7	42.0	63.6
F	Nina Davis 5' 11" Jr.		21.1	8.3	1.6	58.4	69.6
F	Kristina Higgins 6' 5" Sr.		3.3	3.3	0.5	50.5	42.1
C	Beatrice Mompremier* 6' 4" Fr.		25.5	15.2	2.6	63.2	69.9

*High school stats


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SI's All-Americas

FIRST TEAM

Breanna Stewart earns player of the year honors for the third straight time; only USC star Cheryl Miller has accomplished that feat (1984 to '86).

G **Moriah Jefferson**
Senior, UConn

G **Tiffany Mitchell**
Senior, South Carolina

F **Breanna Stewart**
Senior, UConn

F **Brianna Turner**
Sophomore, Notre Dame

F **Nina Davis**
Junior, Baylor

SECOND TEAM

As a freshman, Kelsey Mitchell led the nation in scoring (24.9 points per game) and set an NCAA record for three-pointers (127).

G **Diamond DeShields**
Sophomore, Tennessee

G **Kelsey Mitchell**
Sophomore, Ohio State

F **Morgan Tuck**
Junior, UConn

F **A'ja Wilson**
Sophomore, South Carolina

C **Brionna Jones**
Junior, Maryland

COACH OF THE YEAR

Kevin McGuff *Ohio State*

After getting his team back to the NCAA tournament for the first time in three years, McGuff's talent is healthy and ready to unseat Maryland as Big Ten champ.

FRESHMAN OF THE YEAR

G **Asia Durr** *Louisville*

The Cardinals' Kevin Waltz says the 5' 10" Durr is the best ballhandler he's seen in two decades as a coach, and she's almost fully recovered from a groin injury.



NAM Y. HUH/AP

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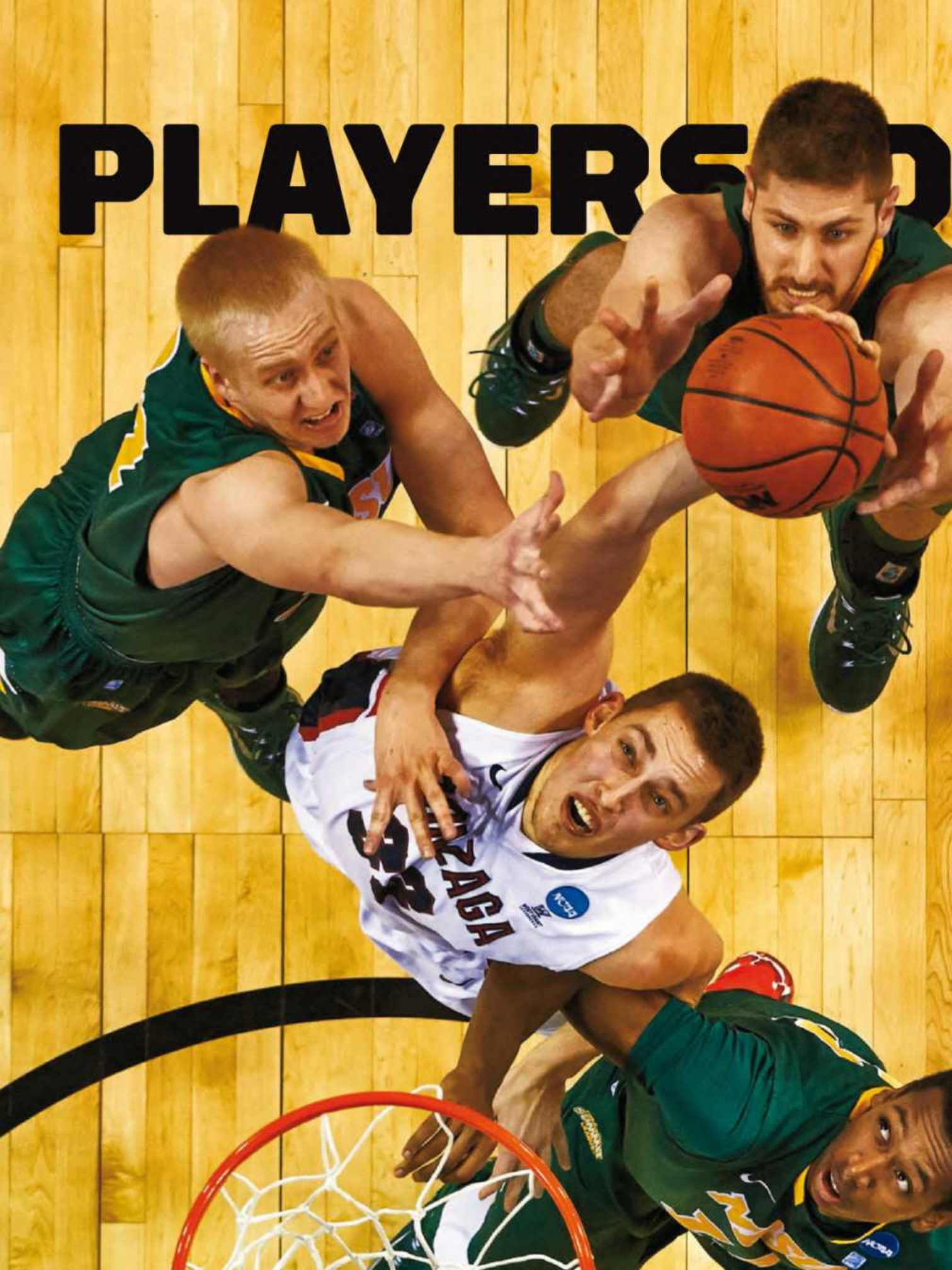
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PLAYERS



F THE YEAR

THE USE OF ADVANCED STATS, RECRUITING RATINGS, COACHES' TENDENCIES AND INTEL FROM TEAMS ON HOW THEIR ROTATIONS WILL BE STRUCTURED MAKES SI'S INDIVIDUAL PROJECTIONS THE MOST SCIENTIFIC YOU'LL FIND

COMPILED BY LUKE WINN, DAN HANNER AND CHRIS JOHNSON

Photograph by
John W. McDonough
For Sports Illustrated



THE FAVORITES

Kyle Wiltjer

6' 10" senior forward, Gonzaga

SI forecasts that Wiltjer will lead the nation in scoring (21.0 points per game) and be the top high-usage, high-efficiency scorer (127.9 offensive rating) while playing for a top 10 team. That's a POY trifecta. The Zags' willingness to play a three-big lineup—with Wiltjer at small forward and Domantas Sabonis and Przemek Karnowski on the blocks—frees up more minutes for Wiltjer to boost his candidacy. He is one of only two consensus first- or second-team All-Americas back this season (along with Virginia junior guard Malcolm Brogdon), which gives Wiltjer's candidacy a built-in boost.

Ben Simmons

6' 10" freshman forward, LSU

Simmons's favorite status is due to both his all-around abilities as a point forward and his ideal situation in Baton Rouge, where frontcourt stars Jarell Martin and Jordan Mickey combined to take 776 shots and grab 613 rebounds last season—then left early for the NBA. SI's system projects Simmons as the nation's top-scoring freshman (17.2 points per game) and one of just two major-conference players to average a double double, along with Baylor forward Rico Gathers. That Simmons averaged 20.0 points, 9.0 rebounds and 5.4 assists during LSU's August tour of Australia bolsters our confidence in his POY campaign.

CHRIS PARENT/LSU ATHLETICS (SIMMONS)

THE SECOND TIER
Players of the Year



Buddy Hield *6' 4" senior guard, Oklahoma*
As a proven, volume scorer—and clear No. 1 offensive option—on a team that should be in the top 20 all season, Hield is an obvious contender. He'll play major minutes in a fast-paced attack and be within reach of the D-I scoring title.



Denzel Valentine *6' 5" senior guard, Michigan State*
He hasn't made any major preseason All-America first teams, but as a statistical monster who could lead the Spartans in points, rebounds and assists, he's a dark horse pick. Valentine can operate on the wing or as an oversized point guard.



Melo Trimble *6' 3" sophomore guard, Maryland*
As one of the nation's best guards at drawing fouls—and an 86.3% career free throw shooter—Trimble is a reliable scorer. His numbers might decline slightly from last season, but he'll get credit for leading a title contender.



Georges Niang *6' 8" senior forward, Iowa State*
He can make threes, produce in the post and in midrange, and pass more adroitly than any other college power forward. Niang thrived in former coach Fred Hoiberg's spread-out, iso-heavy offense; how will he fare under Steve Prohm?



Perry Ellis *6' 8" senior forward, Kansas*
While he wasn't a superstar during his first three years, the Jayhawks lack a go-to guy on the perimeter—and five-star recruit Cheick Diallo hasn't been cleared by the NCAA—so Ellis is well-positioned to put up POY-worthy numbers.



Yogi Ferrell *6' 0" senior guard, Indiana*
He'll be an efficient, high-volume scorer (127.2 offensive rating on 23.1% usage) and will orchestrate an offense that projects to be the country's best. Ferrell will challenge the Indiana record for most three-pointers made.



Jaylen Brown *6' 7" freshman forward, Cal*
While point guard Tyrone Wallace took the bulk of the Bears' shots last season, and he's back for his senior year, Brown will emerge as the top option in 2015–16. He's an attacking wing who, at 225 pounds, is physically ready to make a big impact.



Kris Dunn *6' 4" junior guard, Providence*
He's projected to use the highest rate of possessions of any All-America candidate (30.3%) and lead the nation in assists (6.6), but D-I's top point guard is a wild card because the Friars are unlikely to get a ticket to the Big Dance.



GREG NELSON FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (HIELD, FERRELL, ALLEN); DAVID E. KLUTHO FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (VALENTINE, ELLIS); G FIUME/MARYLAND TERRAPINS/GETTY IMAGES (TRIMBLE); AL BELLO/GETTY IMAGES (NIANG); JOHN TODD/ISIPHOTOS.COM (BROWN); STEW MILNE/AP (DUNN); ALEX GOODLETT/GETTY IMAGES (BARHAM); BOB LEVERONE/AP (GIBBS)

RANGING OF THE GUARDS

The biggest reason Davidson will contend for a second straight Atlantic 10 regular season title is the backcourt of 6' 5" senior shooting guard **Jordan Barham** (*left*, who made 60.3% of his twos last season) and 6-foot junior point guard **Jack Gibbs** (who made 42.4% of his threes). The Wildcats project to be the nation's top duo of high-volume scorers—11.9 and 17.5 points per game, respectively—who also have offensive ratings in the 120s.





BREAKOUT TIME

These 10 multi-bid-conference players will have the biggest increases in their scoring averages

POINTS PER GAME ▸ 0 5 10 15 20

1 **Grayson Allen** — LAST YEAR: 4.4 — THIS YEAR: 16.4
6' 5" sophomore guard, Duke
The former top 25 recruit is an outstanding shooter; the flashes he showed in the NCAA title game (16 points) were a sign of things to come.

2 **V.J. Beachem** — 5.9 — 14.3
6' 8" junior forward, Notre Dame
He was an efficient scorer as a sophomore, making 42 of 101 three-point shots (41.6%), and coach Mike Brey relies heavily on his veteran players.

3 **Moses Kingsley** — 3.6 — 10.6
6' 10" junior forward, Arkansas
After an off-season heavy on player departures and arrests, the only certainty for the Razorbacks is that Kingsley will get the ball a lot more.

4 **Parker Jackson-Cartwright** — 2.9 — 9.8
5' 11" sophomore guard, Arizona
He had a 32.8% assist rate as a reserve in '14–15. With the graduation of point guard T.J. McConnell, Jackson-Cartwright can help himself to more baskets.

5 **Obi Enechionyia** — 5.3 — 12.2
6' 9" sophomore forward, Temple
He was the Owls' most efficient player and best shot blocker last season. Temple lost two of its three top scorers, so he'll be a critical part of the offense.

6 **Dane Pineau** — 3.8 — 10.6
6' 9" junior forward, Saint Mary's
Pineau made 67.2% of his twos last year and was a strong defensive rebounder. He has the skills to replace some of top scorer Brad Waldow's production.

7 **Keita Bates-Diop** — 3.8 — 10.5
6' 7" sophomore guard, Ohio State
D'Angelo Russell got the headlines in Columbus while Bates-Diop struggled to earn playing time last year. Now he's ready for the spotlight.

8 **Bronson Koenig** — 8.7 — 15.4
6' 5" junior guard, Wisconsin
With 2015 POY Frank Kaminsky gone, Koenig—who filled in ably for the injured Traevon Jackson at the point—will take a leading role in the offense.

9 **Brandon Perry** — 6.2 — 12.7
6' 7" junior forward, San Diego
He used an aggressive 28.9% of the Toreros' possessions off the bench last season. With the three top scorers gone, they'll need Perry to use even more.

10 **Kam Williams** — 5.4 — 11.8
6' 2" sophomore guard, Ohio State
Williams might be the Big Ten's best dunker—just one reason he was such an efficient scorer (123.3 offensive rating) last season.



THE BEST SCORER YOU'RE LIKELY NEVER TO SEE

D.J. Balentine averaged 27.2 points in Evansville's five CollegeInsider.com tournament games (en route to winning the championship), and he has averaged 21.4 points over the past two full seasons. The 6' 3" senior guard will be a top challenger for the national scoring title, but to make the NCAA tournament the Purple Aces will probably need to beat Wichita State, and that's not likely to happen this year.

DON'T SLEEP ON . . .

You may have forgotten about Boise State swingman **Anthony Drmic** (3, *below*), a dynamic scoring threat (career average: 15.3 points) who played just seven games in 2014–15 before having left-ankle surgery. The 6' 6" Australian was granted a fifth year of eligibility as a medical hardship case and should contend for Mountain West player-of-the-year honors.



FOREIGN INVASION

Top Freshman Scorers

RANK	PLAYER/SCHOOL	PPG
1	Ben Simmons, LSU	17.2
2	Jaylen Brown, California	16.8
3	Brandon Ingram, Duke	15.6
4	Jamal Murray, Kentucky	14.4
5	Malik Newman, Mississippi State	14.3
6	Skal Labissiere, Kentucky	13.8
7	Henry Ellenson, Marquette	13.6
8	Stephen Zimmerman, UNLV	12.6
9	Derryck Thornton, Duke	11.9
10	Diamond Stone, Maryland	11.4
11	Ivan Rabb, California	11.2
12	Antonio Blakeney, LSU	11.0
13	Cheick Diallo, Kansas	10.8
14	JaQuan Lyle, Ohio State	10.7
15	Ethan Happ, Wisconsin	10.7
16	Dejounte Murray, Washington	10.6
17	Jawun Evans, Oklahoma State	10.6
18	Caleb Swanigan, Purdue	9.9
19	Nick Emery, BYU	9.5
20	Tyler Dorsey, Oregon	9.4

No one tracks this statistic officially, but this freshman class could set a record for international firepower. After top scorer Ben Simmons (Australia), SI projects Canadian combo guard **Jamal Murray** to lead a balanced Kentucky team in scoring—but Haitian import Skal Labissiere won't be far behind. Mali-born power forward Cheick Diallo should be a fierce rim protector in addition to a solid offensive contributor for Kansas. At Oregon, 6' 4" sweet-shooting guard Tyler Dorsey, who played for Greece's under-19 national team, should be the Ducks' fourth-leading scorer.



TREVOR RUSZKOWSKI/USA TODAY SPORTS (BALENTINE); CHET WHITE/UK ATHLETICS (MURRAY); ETHAN MILLER/GETTY IMAGES (DRMIC)



MIND THE GAP

Last year Cal outscored the average Division I opponent by 3.7 points per 100 possessions. With a pair of five-star freshmen—6' 7" Jaylen Brown and 6' 11" Ivan Rabb—joining an already potent lineup, SI projects the Bears will lift that figure to 19.5 points per 100 possessions in 2015-16. That's the biggest anticipated increase for any school ranked in the top 50.

JOHN LOCHER/AP (SCOTT)





GREAT SCOTT

Colorado's 6' 10" center **Josh Scott** ranks second behind Gonzaga's Kyle Wiltjer among players who will use at least 24% of possessions and have an offensive rating of at least 120, which could make Scott the most valuable offensive player in the Pac-12—even if the Buffs don't make the NCAAs.

Urban Legend





WICHITA STATE POINT GUARD FRED VANVLEET GREW UP HEARING CAUTIONARY TALES OF PROSPECTS FROM HIS RUST BELT CITY WHO NEVER PANNED OUT. HIS STORY WILL HAVE A MUCH DIFFERENT ENDING

BY LUKE WINN

SMALL FORTUNE
VanVleet (23) is on track to lead the Shockers on the most successful four-year run for a program outside the power conferences.

Photograph by **William Purnell/ Icon Sportswire**

THE ROCKFORD, ILL., AAU team Fred VanVleet starred on during high school was called PrymeTyme—a defiant name, given that the city's prime was so long past that none of the team's players nor most of their parents had been alive to see it. Rockford is one of the Rust Belt's worst casualties, a former manufacturing power 85 miles northwest of Chicago with a population of 150,000 and shrinking. In 1993 its school district was found guilty, in federal court, of decades of what a judge called "cruel" discrimination against minority students, ranging from inferior facilities to substandard curricula. The city was ordered to make $252 million in changes, but the current struggles of Rockford's African-Americans are part of that ugly educational legacy: According to U.S. Census Bureau data from 2014, Rockford had the highest unemployment rate for black adults of any city in the nation, a staggering 28.9%.

Shoe companies have had no interest in sponsoring AAU teams from markets like Rockford, so for PrymeTyme to compete against the elite Nike and Adidas programs it had to fund-raise, collect dues and spend long hours driving (rather than flying) to tournaments. During those car rides coach Anthony (Doc) Cornell told stories about the closest Rockford had come to basketball greatness. And the one that VanVleet heard most—to him, the most Rockford story of them all—was about Lee Lampley.

"You shoulda seen this guy," Cornell would say, conjuring images of gyms that drew fire-code-violation crowds to see the 6-foot Lampley "shoot the leather off the ball." There was the time in 1992 when Lampley had 32 points for Boylan Catholic in an upset of the No. 1–ranked Chicago King team that had a cameo in *Hoop Dreams*. Or the games during the 1993–94 season, when he averaged 29.9 points—more than a Mount Carmel phenom named Antoine Walker—and Lampley was named all-state, the last first-team selection from Rockford. Doc claimed that if Lampley hadn't lacked the grades to accept a scholarship to Illinois, hadn't been kicked off of two junior college teams, hadn't been convicted of trying to sell 23 bags of crack in a Rockford housing project in '97 and enough other felonies to spend long stints behind bars—"People would be saying that Steph Curry is the best shooter not since Ray Allen, but since *Lee Lampley*."

Old heads love telling stories about basketball coulda-beens—cautionary tales that veer into mythology. VanVleet, PrymeTyme's 6-foot point guard who would go on to earn a 3.5 GPA at Auburn High, came to hate the Lampley story and others like it. He'd watch NBA games and see proof of one version of the American dream—black players who'd made it out of some miserable hometown—and it ate at him that none was ever from *his* hometown, which had gone decades without producing even a high-major, Division I black star. For the men who came before him in the same neighborhoods and the same schools, it seemed that all the dream did was die, again and again.

So when people began praising VanVleet's play, it was as ominous as it was optimistic, so easily would he fit into another coulda-been lament. Illinois recruiting expert Cavan Walsh called VanVleet a magician who saw two steps ahead of everyone else on the floor. VanVleet was just a 15-year-old sophomore when his Auburn High coach, Bryan Ott, told the *Rockford Register Star*, "It seems like he almost always makes the right decisions at the right times." Cornell said he felt like Tony Dungy, because he had a young Peyton Manning

THE ANSWER TO ALL THE QUESTIONS ABOUT HIS DAD, THE QUESTIONS THAT STILL MADE HIM ANGRY, MIGHT BE THAT *THERE WAS NO ANSWER*.

running his offense. There were also conquests that might, years down the road, seem like myths: How in the spring and summer of 2011, PrymeTyme, with just two D-I prospects (VanVleet and eventual St. Bonaventure star Marcus Posley), took down powerful AAU teams such as Indiana Elite (with IU-bound Yogi Ferrell) and the Houston Defenders (with Kentucky-bound Aaron and Andrew Harrison) and went 32–4. Or how in March 2012, VanVleet's senior year, he led an Auburn team whose starting lineup topped out at 6 feet to the Illinois semifinals and was named first team all-state—the first Rockford player so honored since Lampley.

But VanVleet has since defied the traditional narrative: He has continued to achieve. When people talk in a decade or two about the greatest four-season run by a mid-major, the debate will likely center around Butler, from 2007–08 through '10–11, and Wichita State, from '12–13 through '15–16, but there will be no argument over who was at the center of the Shockers' success—a point guard who made it out of Rockford and made everyone around him better.

After being ignored by Big Ten schools due to his stature (and, he believes, his hometown's rep), VanVleet committed to Wichita State in July 2011, and as a true freshman was the sixth man during its run to the '13 Final Four. As a sophomore starter, VanVleet became one of the best leaders in college basketball, piloting the Shockers to a national record 35–0 start before they fell to Kentucky in their second NCAA tournament game, and was named an honorable mention All-America. Last year he averaged 13.6 points and 5.2 assists while taking the Shockers to the Sweet 16, and this off-season both he and senior shooting guard Ron Baker passed on the NBA draft in order to make a fourth run at a national title.

In Wichita, where the Shockers have gone 95–15 during his career, VanVleet is the face of winning. He is sitting in a back-corner booth of a minimall deli during an October lunch hour, getting deep into a discussion of his Rockford youth, when he is interrupted by a woman, smartphone in hand, teenage members of the girls' tennis team from nearby Andover High timidly in tow.

"I'm so sorry," the woman says, "It's just that tomorrow we have states, and we've won back-to-back titles and we're going for a three-peat. So I thought, Who better to take a picture with than you for inspiration?"

VanVleet is happy to oblige. Everyone smiles.

"Any tips for the girls?" the woman asks. VanVleet pauses, and then sheepishly says, "Just play hard—and have fun."

It's not that VanVleet lacks an answer on what drives him to win. It's just that his answer isn't translatable for a group of suburban high school girls. "My whole mind-set growing up," VanVleet says later, "was that I was not going to let myself be one of those Rockford people who didn't pan out. And I carried that chip with me to college—that I need to be that one who actually breaks the stigma. Their failure is in the back of my head. That is what I'm running from."

THE CLOSER a story hits home, the more likely it is to gain unwanted purchase in your brain, to linger there and haunt you. Lampley's narrative did not begin in a packed gym in the '90s. It began on the front page of the *Register Star*, three days before Valentine's Day, in 1982. A man was found lying in a snowbank in an employee parking lot of SwedishAmerican Hospital, steps from his '76 Cadillac Brougham, dead of multiple shots from a large-caliber handgun. He was a surgical orderly, and in the late '60s he had served in the Army. He was 34, and among those he left behind was the six-year-old boy named after him: Lee A. Lampley Jr. When Lee Jr. was arrested for selling crack 15 years later, locals said they'd seen his downfall coming. Despite his prodigious talent, he lacked the family structure to save him from Rockford's crime-infested streets.

On April 16, 1999, the *Register Star* carried another story of a black man shot and killed. He'd taken two bullets to the chest, at close range, in another man's apartment. The shooter claimed it was a break-in, but he was later charged with felony obstruction of justice for attempting to deceive police. The dead man was 28. In his prime, he'd been a hyper-competitive 6' 8" forward at Rockford's Guilford High who drew interest from colleges. He never enrolled anywhere, and found work detailing cars. People called him Boomer or Darnell, his middle name. His real name was Fredderick Manning. Among those he left behind was a fiancée, Susan VanVleet, with whom he'd had two sons, seven-year-old Darnell, and five-year-old Fredderick, his namesake.

Susan summoned her boys to a couch in the basement of her parents' house just north of Rockford in Machesney Park, where they were all living, and explained that their father was gone. Fred



GREG NELSON FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (RIGHT); WILLIAM PURNELL/ICON SPORTSWIRE

SOMETHING TO HOLD ON TO

When he's made enough money from pro basketball, VanVleet wants to help fix the broken schools in his hometown.



was too young to process what had happened. He has no recollection of seeing his father's body at the funeral. Susan told him parts of the story as he aged, and eventually he learned that his father had been killed in a drug deal gone wrong. Fred has always been serious; but it was losing his father, Susan says, that turned Fred into "a kid who was angry at the world."

"I felt like I'd been burned or that everybody owed me something," VanVleet says. He struggled with whom to blame; sometimes he blamed himself. "You ask yourself a million questions. Why was my dad not home with me that night? What did me or my brother or my mom do wrong? What did my grandparents do wrong, what did my dad do wrong? You're just trying to find an answer."

In sixth grade he was the point guard on a Chicagoland club team that went to the AAU nationals in Hampton, Va.—a very big deal. But when he called home to Susan during the tournament, he sounded, as he so often did, unhappy. She had tried many ways to cheer him up. This time she challenged him: "Have you ever stopped and told God thank you for everything that he's made up for in your life?"

She told Fred to consider that he was athletically gifted, intelligent on the court and in school—and by then he had a new father figure. "Things are coming easy to you," she said, "and it's almost like God was trying to give back to you what was taken away. If you acknowledged that sometime, it might get easier."

MILITARY MIND-SET

A former Army boxer, Danforth (below, with Susan) pushed VanVleet to be mentally tough.



Fred said O.K. They did not discuss it further. But when the team returned to Illinois, its coach, Brian Harvey, told Susan, "You're never gonna believe what happened. We weren't playing very well, and halfway through the tournament I was really yelling at the kids, and I give them a break and time to just chill out. I wanted them to think about what they were doing. The next thing I know Fred is asking them to all come in and say a prayer. What 12-year-old kid does that?"

Fred says he had a realization on that trip: The answer to all his questions about his dad, the questions that still made him angry, might be that *there was no answer*. That what you had to do, instead, was try to appreciate the present. Only then would things start to get easier.



HE HAD HIS CARE
FRED'S GOTTA PLA
"IT'S MY SENIOR

ROCKFORD POLICE detectives on the day shift can get by with two-piece suits, but Joe Danforth insists on always wearing a three-piece. "I just love that whole *Untouchables* look," he says, and on this October Tuesday he's wearing a charcoal ensemble over a cardinal-red dress shirt and a black silk tie, with his badge and a holstered Glock on his right hip. He is a bull of a man, with his head shaved slick, a former Army boxing-team middleweight and light heavyweight who fought for the Fort Hood (Texas) Worldbeaters in the '90s. The ringtone on his phone is rapper Bone Crusher's 2003 hit "Never Scared," and Danforth carries himself with a jovial swagger suggesting just that—even though Rockford's violent crime rate is the second-highest *in the nation* for cities under 200,000.

This past summer, in Danforth's 20th year on the force, he was promoted to detective, and the first case he caught was the murder of 15-year-old Martavius Lewers. It was the 15th homicide in Rockford in 2015: a gunshot through a window of a residential music studio on the city's west side caught Martavius in the head while he was recording with friends. It remains unclear whether he was the target.

Danforth has worked 30-plus cases since—home invasions, armed robberies and more, a leaning tower of manila accordion folders on his desk—but the senselessness of the unsolved Lewers case wears on him. Danforth has coached basketball, running an AAU program called Rockford 5-0 because, he says, "you can't let this job be your whole life." The left wall of his cubicle is decorated with three autographed pictures of teenagers playing hoops for the same school that Lewers attended, Auburn High: Danforth's oldest son, J.D., who's now 23; and his stepsons, Darnell and Fred VanVleet.

Danforth was one of the policemen who responded to the scene of Manning's shooting in 1999. It was not until two years later that he encountered the VanVleets. J.D. and Fred—then a second-grader—were in the Fightin' Titan Boys Basketball Camp at Boylan High, where Lampley had played. Susan

DAVID E. KLUTHO FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (TOP); ANNE RYAN FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED



Danforth's mannerisms, obsession with detail and military mentality, to the extent that Doc Cornell would say to Danforth, "I swear that's your damn kid."

Now, does Danforth deserve credit for VanVleet's court vision, Floyd Mayweather–quick hands and the unshakable confidence to overrule a final-possession pick-and-roll play that Cornell called in a 2011 AAU game, say, "I got this" and proceed to bury a game-winning three? Not at all. "This ain't *The Wizard of Oz*," Danforth says. "You can't just give the Cowardly Lion a heart and expect that mother------ to fight, you know? That's gotta be in you, and that was in Fred."

But VanVleet did need sharpening. "A lot of things [Danforth] did for me hardened my mind," VanVleet says. "He gave me a mind-set that was calculated but aggressive, with no fear or regrets, like a war general."

That would be key to thriving under the Shockers' intense and exacting coach, Gregg Marshall, whose motto is Play angry. VanVleet began his freshman season buried at the back end of the rotation, gradually earned more minutes during Missouri Valley Conference play and then had his career kick-started in a peculiar way: After a loss to Creighton in the Shockers' last game before the NCAA tournament, Malcolm Armstead, the team's *senior starting point guard*, approached Marshall's wife, Lynn, son, Kellen, and daughter, Maggie, with a request. "Tell coach that Fred's gotta play," Kellen (now a student manager for Wichita State) recalls Armstead saying, while expressing a desire to play alongside VanVleet at the two. "It's my senior year, and I'm trying to go to the Final Four."

The message was delivered, and Marshall put VanVleet on the floor for 20 minutes in the ninth-seeded Shockers' second-round meeting with No. 1

ER KICK-STARTED IN A PECULIAR WAY: "TELL COACH THAT
Y," THE STARTING POINT GUARD TOLD MARSHALL'S FAMILY.
YEAR, AND I'M TRYING TO GO TO THE FINAL FOUR."

VanVleet and Danforth met in the gym that day; they started dating within a few months. Two years later Susan and her two boys joined Danforth and his two boys in their house on the northwest side.

"We kind of did a *Brady Bunch* thing," Danforth says, and it was not the smoothest transition. Says Susan, "Joe was . . . very militant with the boys." What did Fred think? "He was a d---. He had everybody walking on eggshells." It was the opposite of the warm, lax environment at Susan's parents' house. Now there were bed checks, reprimands over a single unwashed dish and wake-up calls at 5:45 a.m. for intense workouts that included full-court one-on-one in weighted vests. The worst thing, VanVleet says, was when he had to get dropped off by Danforth at school: "Kids used to wear shirts with a stop sign that said SNITCHING on it—like, *stop snitching*—and here I am pulling up to school in a cop car."

But for all of VanVleet's resistance—he hated the extreme discipline and early workouts, and resented the fact that Danforth chose to coach J.D. in AAU and left Fred to play with PrymeTyme—a funny thing happened: He started to acquire

Gonzaga. With 1:28 left and the shot clock running down, VanVleet rewarded his coach by hitting the dagger three that put Wichita up five and out of the Zags' reach. In 24 minutes against Ohio State in the Elite Eight, VanVleet outplayed the celebrated Aaron Craft, and through all 2013 postseason games, VanVleet dished out 14 assists against just six turnovers.

That year's Final Four, in Atlanta, was where the Shockers blew a late lead against eventual champion Louisville, but it was also where a protracted standoff between two hardheaded men came to an end.

Danforth had never been one to compliment VanVleet, only drive him; VanVleet, in turn, had never been one to acknowledge Danforth's contributions. The day before the Louisville game Danforth, who'd driven to Atlanta and gotten caught up in the magnitude of the event, allowed himself a moment of vulnerability. He texted VanVleet to say, "I love you. I'm proud of you."

VanVleet had never called Danforth "Dad," but he wrote back, "If you never felt like you were my dad, I want you to know, I do feel like you're my dad. You raised me, and I appreciate everything you've done for me."

VANVLEET RETURNED to Wichita State and became its clear-cut leader. It was not a coincidence that the Shockers broke 1990–91 UNLV's record for most consecutive wins to start a season, and they entered the NCAA tournament 34–0 and ranked No. 2 in the nation. VanVleet was a 20-year-old sophomore in a rotation that included four seniors, but everyone considered him an old soul. He ran the offense





ROCKFORD TRIALS

VanVleet (above, with ball) was determined to not end up like Lampley (4); Marshall (far right) says the guard is like a head coach on the floor.

with efficiency—in one four-game stretch in December and January he had 23 assists and no turnovers, and his assist-to-turnover ratio in March was 36-to-8—sat front row center during film sessions and was the team's most trusted voice in huddles and in the locker room. "Fred always has the right thing to say at the right time," Baker says. "I don't know where he gets it from, but it's like music to your ears. It's always nice to hear his voice when we win—and when we lose."

After the most devastating loss of their careers—their epic battle with No. 8–seeded Kentucky in the NCAA tournament's round of 32, which came down to the final possession and left them five wins short of the first perfect season since Indiana in '75–76—heads turned to VanVleet for wisdom. First he helped coax an inconsolable senior, Chadrack Lufile, out of their locker room bathroom at St. Louis's Scottrade Center, so that they could face the loss as a group ("You win together, you lose together"), and then VanVleet reminded his teammates of their legacy. "This don't take away from nothing we've been doing all year," VanVleet told the room. "Everybody's got futures in this. . . . This is not ending." When Baker was moping on the bus outside the arena, VanVleet heaped positives on him: Neither of them had arrived at Wichita as NBA prospects, and they had just gone toe-to-toe with a team that had five future draftees. VanVleet knew that he and Baker would be together in more NCAA tournaments, and he wanted to build his teammate back up.

He did all this even though he was the one who missed the potential game-winning three, from the top of the key, as time expired. That goes in, Wichita keeps winning, and who knows? He might have been able to ride that fame to the draft, where he was viewed as a fringe first-round prospect. There was also the strong possibility that VanVleet had played most of the second half in a partial fog. After committing an offensive foul on a drive with 16:32 left in the game, he hit his head on the floor and was nearly knocked out; he remained a bit off following the collision.

VanVleet spent the postgame press conference wincing at the lights and feeling his head throb, and for the first time in his life a teammate, Cleanthony Early, asked him about part of a play that he could not clearly remember. After the press conference, when the team's trainer gave VanVleet a concussion test, he declined to acknowledge any symptoms. He felt there was minimal risk; the season was over. "I didn't want that to be the story line: *He didn't play as well as he could have, he missed the shot, oh—he had a concussion*," VanVleet says. "I think I had a concussion; I just didn't want to tell anybody."

For better or worse VanVleet believes that showing weakness limits his ability to inspire teammates—and that being a leader "means that I could get everybody on my team to come fight with me." He means this literally: "Some guys would take a lot more work than others, but if I got in a fight, I know that I could convince everyone to have my back. If you can get them to do that, then you can get them to chase a rebound or believe in themselves to make a shot."

Or persuade them that they can come back in 2014–15, win 30 more games, and beat Kansas to go to the Sweet 16; or that this season they can leverage the advantages of having the most seasoned lineup of any elite team. Wichita State is likely to start four seniors—forwards Anton Grady and Evan Wessel, and guards Baker and VanVleet—and no coach has more trust in his point guard's grasp of an offense

GREG NELSON FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (TOP); COURTESY OF ROCKFORD REGISTER STAR/RRSTAR.COM

"FRED ALWAYS HAS THE RIGHT THING TO SAY AT THE RIG
SAYS. "I DON'T KNOW WHERE HE GETS IT FROM, BUT IT'S LIKE
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and knowledge of personnel than Marshall. "With Fred, it's like having a *head coach* on the floor," Marshall says. "He's got the ability and the freedom from me to audible-ize anytime he wants."

The Shockers' veterans have the freedom to self-police, running a kangaroo court in their locker room at Charles Koch Arena. If someone is charged with violating the team's unwritten code—such as in September, when a freshman was alleged to have flirted with a teammate's female friend, and possibly to have impugned that teammate's character in the process—he is hauled before the court. The primary judge, from the vantage of his corner locker, is VanVleet. And these are the rarer occasions when VanVleet is not overly serious. "It's as good as an *SNL* skit," says one observer. "Freshmen pleading to Fred, him shaking his head, saying, 'Oh, no, I can't allow that.' "

"I give people a chance to present their case," VanVleet explains, with a smirk. "Then we bring out the evidence and convict them. Because most of the time it's just a guy who's wrong, who won't admit he's wrong. And we take care of it ourselves."

FOR THE Danforths and VanVleets, 2015 has been a year of coming together. In May, after 11 years of cohabitation—and having a daughter, Aaliyah—Joe and Susan were married at a Rockford church. In June, Darnell, who had played briefly at Illinois Central College and also coached Auburn High's freshman team, moved to Wichita to be with Fred for his senior season; J.D., whose playing career ended at NAIA Ashford University in Clinton, Iowa, last year, joined them for three months. Shontai Neal, VanVleet's girlfriend since high school and a fellow WSU student, lives with VanVleet and Darnell in a split-level duplex four miles east of campus. The living room's decorations include a Shockers flag, a bench chair from the 2013 Final Four and the '14 Larry Bird Trophy, which VanVleet received as the conference player of the year.

Growing up, VanVleet used to help his older brothers with their homework, and at 21 he persuaded them to come to Wichita. "Darnell especially, I wanted him to get out and see other things, like what a millionaire's house looks like," says VanVleet, whose coach, Marshall, has a new contract that pays $3 million annually. "There's no opportunity in Rockford, so if you stay there, you don't see the world as very big." (Darnell, when asked if he misses being back home, says, "No, I don't miss it one bit.")

VanVleet, a sociology major, recently tweeted a study from 247WallSt.com that called Rockford the second-worst city for black Americans, behind only Milwaukee. It highlighted Rockford's alarming black unemployment rate and the huge gap between the median household income of whites ($51,264) and blacks ($22,651) in the metro area. The data reinforced what he believed growing up as a black-identifying child of a biracial family—"Everybody knows," he says, "that Rockford is racist"—and reminded him that his city has a long way to go in addressing inequality. VanVleet's hope is that when he's made enough money playing basketball, and has some financial leverage, he can help fix a west side school system whose curriculum, he believes, fails to emphasize practical learning, does not teach enough black history and promotes inept students until they're old enough to drop out.

As the graduation speaker for Auburn High's class of 2014, VanVleet told the crowd at BMO Harris Bank Center, "They're always telling us, 'Rockford is a miserable place to live. There's not a lot of talent coming out of Rockford.' Blah, blah, blah. You know the rest of the story. I look at it like there's only two things you can do about it. You can live up to it and make it worse or you can change it and make it better."

It was during that same off-season that VanVleet went to play pickup in the small gym at Northwest Community Center, where Doc Cornell had invited some of Rockford's old heads and young prospects. One of them was a 39-year-old who did not, at first glance, look the part of a baller. He wore a do-rag and jean shorts, and his right arm was permanently bent, the result of some childhood injury. But he could get that arm into shooting position just fine, and as VanVleet saw it, "The guy's jumper was perfect—*wet*, all the way to half-court." The guy was Lee Lampley.

Lampley had been released from the Danville (Ill.) Correctional Center in February 2014, after serving four years for possession of between 100 and 400 grams of cocaine. He had heard about VanVleet, seen him on TV since getting out of jail, and wanted to talk to him.

VanVleet ended up giving Lampley a ride home, during which he said a couple of things: *I hope you learn from my mistakes.* And: *I knew your real dad.* Lampley had been in the same drug game as Manning and said he could find some answers. VanVleet was returning to Wichita the next day, so they exchanged numbers. "I'm going to call you when you get back to school," Lampley told him, "and I'm gonna let you know what really happened."

The call never came. But really, VanVleet had stopped needing answers long ago. He was O.K. with how he and Lampley had parted ways. The last thing VanVleet had said, upon dropping off the greatest player who never made it out of Rockford, a man 19 years his elder, was *stay out of trouble*. □



GREG NELSON FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED

HT TIME," BAKER
MUSIC TO YOUR
WHEN WE LOSE."



Flawless Finish

→ BY TIM LAYDEN

WE BESEECH A certain purity from our athletes. We want home run hitters to go deep and gold medal sprinters to go fast without the assistance of drugs. We want college athletes to attend classes and work toward meaningful degrees. We want winners to earnestly praise teammates and coaches, and losers to congratulate winners and accept blame. We want contracts honored and honest effort given by all. We get this purity only sporadically, but perhaps that is because we are looking in the wrong places.

Late Saturday afternoon at Keeneland Race Course in Lexington, Ky., a 3-year-old thoroughbred rolled to a 6½-length victory in the Breeders' Cup Classic, the last race of his career. On a gray and windy day, American Pharoah's performance was a dominant coda to a historic season in which he became the first horse in 37 years—and just the 12th in history—to win the Triple Crown. A generation and more had seen nothing like him.

The first time I saw American Pharoah run was last March on a television screen, in the Rebel Stakes at Oaklawn Park in Hot Springs, Ark. My wife and I were going out for the evening, but because Triple Crown season was approaching, and because I would be covering it, I stood impatiently with a TV remote in my hand for a quick look as American Pharoah won by 6¼ lengths in the slop. I had been watching racing for nearly 40 years, and I had never seen a horse run like this. His stride was so fluid it appeared effortless. I was frozen in place, my mouth agape.

Ten weeks later I watched from atop the clubhouse at Churchill Downs in Louisville as Pharoah trained for the Belmont, having already won the Derby and the Preakness. He galloped faster than most horses run at full speed. "Super *chingón*," said exercise rider Martin Garcia to trainer Bob Baffert, invoking Spanish slang for hard-nosed greatness. Former SPORTS ILLUSTRATED writer Kenny Moore once referred to 1968 Olympic 200-meter gold medalist Tommie Smith as "the sweetest mover that ever drew breath." That's Pharoah, among horses. The sweetest mover that ever drew breath.

Some argue that horse racing is not a sport because its "athletes" are animals. Others despise horse racing on the grounds that it is cruel to those same animals. Here in this space, horse racing is not only a sport, it is a primal sport, full of the purity so often lacking elsewhere. Its equine athletes are remarkable machines—graceful and strong, fast yet fragile.

In the 7½ months since he won the Rebel, American Pharoah won the Arkansas Derby, the Kentucky Derby, the Preakness and the Belmont. After resting briefly in California, he flew across the country to win the Haskell at Monmouth Park in New Jersey on Aug. 2 and then flew back to California and back across the country again, to New York, where he finished second in the Travers at Saratoga on Aug. 29. (His owner, Ahmed Zayat, didn't have to enter any of these races for the payday—Pharoah's breeding rights had been sold for millions in the weeks before the Kentucky Derby.) The colt then returned one last time to California and flew back to Kentucky on Oct. 27 for the Breeders' Cup. He won seven of eight starts in 2015, traveled more than 20,000 miles and never got an extended rest. "Horses just don't do that," says Baffert.

Here is what Pharoah did, and did repeatedly: He showed up and ran. He was flown and vanned and housed in unfamiliar barns and visited by hordes of adoring fans—whom he welcomed with the personality of a golden retriever—and then (on every day but one) he would emerge from his stall and float counterclockwise around an oval, too fast for the rest. Baffert was so enamored of the colt's running style that he asked veteran jockey Gary Stevens to exercise Pharoah in the morning, just to feel his mechanics; Baffert also asked fellow trainer Todd Pletcher to just once hold Pharoah's lead shank and walk him. "I just wanted to share him with my friends in the sport," says Baffert.

American Pharoah won his last race the way he won most of his races: He bounced to the lead and couldn't be caught. There was a joy in his stride as he opened his lead to three lengths, then four, then five, his adoring fans in full throat. His final victory was a moment unencumbered, unspoiled and unforgettable, as fundamental as sport itself, as pure as the crisp autumn air. □

American Pharoah's final victory was a moment unencumbered, **unspoiled and unforgettable,** as fundamental as sport itself.

Should American Pharoah be Sportsman of the Year?
Join the discussion on Twitter by using **#SIPointAfter** and following **@SITimLayden**

MICHAEL J. LEBRECHT II FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED

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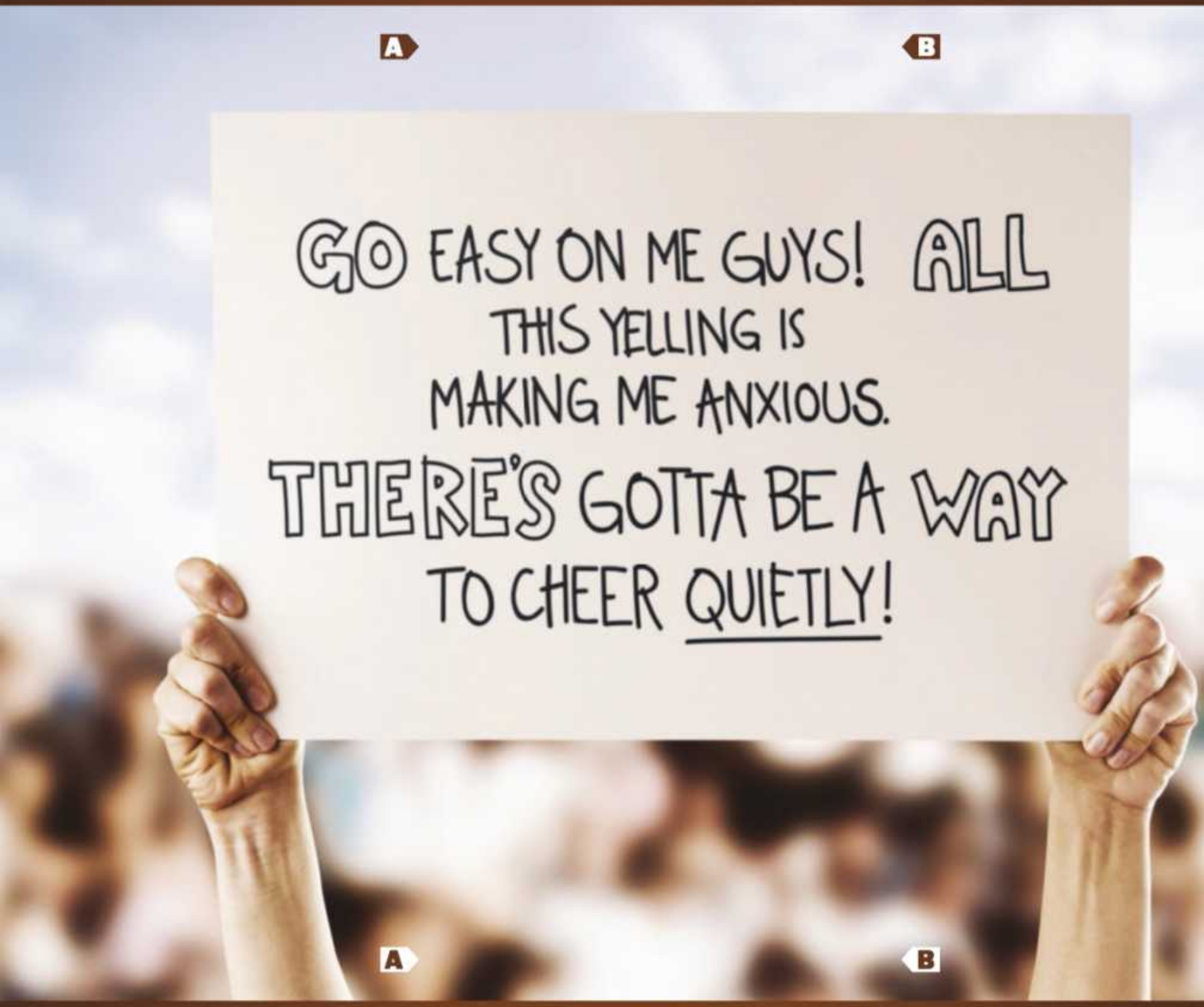
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